Becoming of Age

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Becoming of Age

by SkyeMarsters

Summary

Finally reunited after a hellish series of events, Hannibal and Will are able to seek comfort in one another at last, and their future as witchers seems a promising one. But when Will's new powers begin spiraling out of control, an unexpected arrival throws the whole world into disarray.

Chapter 1

The djinn exploded in a blast of bright red light that sent Will flying across the ghost cabin. Temple met plank as his body crashed into the water-swollen floor of the wrecked ship. His head rang from the impact, and as he shuffled up from the floor, he had to bite his lip to hold back the rising nausea.

The pulsing light hovered in midair, a beacon in the black hole of the long abandoned ship, burning Will's eyes. He held up one hand to shield his face, his steel sword still firm in the other, and made his second approach.

A ball of elemental magic swirled, menacing and beyond any power Will had ever witnessed, and it stood before him as his only solution. Alana had told him it would be difficult, and the look in her eyes had told him it would be impossible, but the sun would be setting soon and Will had made a vow. He would either make the world a place where Hannibal remembered him, or he would stop living in the world. It would be or it wouldn't. Will squared his shoulders, grounding himself, before speaking in his most commanding voice, "You will obey me."

The djinn glowed bright, drew in on itself, and then burst in another wave that swept the room with stunning force. But Will was seldom taken in by the same trick twice, and as the magic rushed him he ducked, and his hair was the only thing caught in the shimmery gale.

He straightened, pleased, his wild curls floating down to frame his jaw. He blew a wisp of the pure-white streak from his eyes and grinned at the djinn. He had no appropriate reason for smiling, but that didn't stop his lips from spreading wide across his face.

The djinn did not speak. Will didn't think it was capable. But he felt it in his mind like a raging vortex. Primal and intelligent and defiant, to be controlled it must first be dominated, and Will sensed its hatred zeroing in on him at the prospect. It was gathering strength.

Will braced himself, sword lifted, and filled his chest with air to speak, but as his lips parted, the djinn vanished. The young witcher experienced shock, then dread, then pain as it reappeared directly behind him and hit him with such fantastic force, it sent him smashing into the wall, breaking through the barnacled-wood and falling into the next room amongst a multitude of barrels. He moaned and tried to tighten his grip on his sword, but it was gone. He brought his fingers to feel along his brow. A gash across his forehead was dripping hot, and he wiped it with the back of his sleeve to keep the blood from his eyes. It stung, but it was hardly his greatest concern. The heavy barrels rolled away from him as he heaved himself back to his feet.

Hannibal was his greatest concern, his only concern, the reason he was in the throes of a self-constructed battle with one of the most powerful magical entities in the known world, now weaponless and injured. Hannibal was why he smiled, still, as the djinn disappeared once more. When it popped up right in front of him, impossibly bright, he threw up his hands and gritted his teeth, trying to steady himself for the next wave of abuse.

Electricity crackled, sparkling static into the atmosphere around them, and Will's mind was filled with a sharp blue throb.

And it wasn't from the djinn.

The arms Will steadied before him thrummed like a heart lived in the palm of his hands. The thump-thump of his pulse matched the rhythm of the djinn's light, and he felt it battling against the electric blue of his mind, its red menace diminishing with every beat of Will's heart.

He dared to speak again, slowly, afraid to break the mysterious magic that seemed to be binding them. "You will grant my wish, and I will release you," he said. The djinn squirmed inside his head, struggling against Will's mental hold. In front of him, it continued to pulse in sync with Will's heart, steady, persistent. Will's hands were shaking from an unknown effort, but the djinn was beginning to give way, turning over in his mind. The red vortex of light and wind was weakening.

Will kept his breath steady and tried to maintain the unexplainable magic coursing through him.

Until the exact moment when he felt the djinn become his.

He wasted no time. "I wish for Hannibal's memory to return to him," demanded Will.

The djinn began to spin, faster and faster, before stopping abruptly, flaring once more with bright light, and winking out.

Will expelled the breath he'd been holding as he dropped to his knees.

It was done. He had done it.

How on earth had he done it?

The room resumed its blackness, but only for a minute, and then another light, tall and wide as a door and most certainly not from a djinn, zipped into existence in front of where Will knelt. He scurried backwards, ducking behind one of the barrels, and watched in awe as a cloaked figure stepped through the portal.

The electricity in the room magnified, and Will felt the hair stand straight on his arms. He hoped the being in the cloak had eyesight inferior to his own, and that the darkness of the ship kept him hidden behind the barrels. But that hope was quickly dashed when the figure turned a shadowed head in his precise direction and spoke.

"Ensh'eass," the voice boomed, and Will was drawn to his feet in a daze. His eyes drifted to the shadow. "Come here to me, Ensh'eass," it said, and Will stepped forward, inexplicably drawn.
He felt his mind empty, and he swayed, dazed out of his control, and walked to the figure. A pale hand emerged from flowing sleeves and tipped back Will's chin, commanding his eyes.

The witcher stared straight into an electric blue gaze.

“Will?”

Cool hands caressed hot skin as Will thrashed awake on his bedroll. Hannibal slid his hands beneath the wool blankets the boy had twisted himself around, and burrowed soundly against his back. “You were having a nightmare,” he whispered, voice heavy with sleep, his lilting accent thick and decadent in Will’s ear. “Where did you go?” he asked, nuzzling against silky brown curls.

The younger man tried to steady his heart, bewildered from his dream.

“I’m all sweaty,” he said, embarrassed, and made a move to pull away from the man behind him, but his attempt was met with a low growl and Hannibal kept him snug in his arms.

“Yes,” agreed the older man, and then he pressed an openmouthed kiss to Will’s neck to taste the boy’s sweat, a deep hum resonating in his chest.

Will tried again to squirm away, if only to enjoy the playful show of force from the other man as Hannibal grasped his wrists and turned him to his back. Silver-blonde hair tumbled across golden eyes as he loomed.

A laugh escaped Will’s lips, releasing a portion of tension from his uneasy sleep, and Hannibal leaned in swiftly to steal the sound for himself, kissing him roughly. The boy relaxed beneath him, his fingers tracing up muscular arms to encircle the man above, strong back easing beneath Will’s touch as he pushed gently against him.

Hannibal pulled away from the kiss to press his lips instead along Will’s jaw line, licking to the hollow of his throat. The mess of sweat and curls purred beneath him.

“What upset you in your dream, Will?” Hannibal asked, drawing himself up on his elbow to rest on his side beside the young witcher. His hands remained touching him though, always touching, as often as he could. Rough fingers ran over the smooth skin of Will’s chest. They pursued languidly lower and traced the scar that stood stark against white flesh. Will’s wound from the hound. It seemed so long ago now as the two witchers lay camped together beneath the cloud covered stars.

“I was in the ship again,” Will said, his skin still fever-dream hot as Hannibal’s hands drifted cool against him.

“Your subconscious keeps returning you to that moment in time,” Hannibal said. “Do you think your waking mind has not yet come to terms with the magnificent feat you achieved?”

Will sighed, finding Hannibal’s hand with his own to lace their fingers together. Only a week had passed since Will had sailed to Skellige to claim his wish from the djinn, and every time he had slept since then he had experienced the same dream. He fought the djinn, he defeated the djinn, and he made his wish. It played and replayed in his dreamscape as it had in reality. It was only the ending that differed and woke him in a panicked sweat.

He had not told Hannibal of the man in the cloak from his dream. It seemed a silly, irrelevant thing. So he kept it to himself, and as Hannibal brought his hand to his lips and kissed his

knuckles, he decided to keep it to himself again. The dream was over. The man in the cloak was gone, and the man beside him stirred in Will a far greater interest.

“I think my waking mind has been distracted,” admitted Will. He rolled to his side to face Hannibal, their hands still joined between them. “Do you have any idea why that might be?”

Hannibal’s eyes were near to glowing in the dark, and Will wondered if his were of equal luminescence. “You have a birthday fast approaching. Often one’s mind can be distressed by the idea of growing older.”

Will laughed. “I’m a witcher now. Doesn’t that mean I’ll live a supernaturally long life while remaining untouched by the torments of time?”

Now it was Hannibal’s turn to laugh, a soft sound as he pushed the hair from the boy’s eyes to kiss the skin above his brow. His lips traced the healed cut across Will’s forehead, earned on the ship. “Would that you were immortal,” he said.

Will rested his head against Hannibal’s chest and shivered at the fingers that began their delicate raking through his sleep-tangled curls. “Glad I’m not,” Will replied honestly. “I think I will like being twenty.” He raised his brows high with an accompanying smirk. “Do you remember if you liked it? Did your mind distress at the idea of growing older?” He had never asked Hannibal exactly how old he was, and the information had never been offered. But Will didn’t care. His cheek nestled insistently into the dusting of grey hairs growing thick on Hannibal’s chest. He liked the grey. He liked everything.

“I was much the same as I am now, though it is hard to say as there were few witnesses to my youth,” Hannibal said, pulling curls through his fingers. “I am happier now, in any case.”

“I’m happy,” said Will, voice muffled in the other’s arms. “For the first time in my life, I think.” He turned his head to drag wet kisses down Hannibal’s chest, and felt the man tighten his embrace. But I could be happier, he wanted to add. Through their first week together of mutually admitted feelings, every night Will had attempted to coax the older man into further intimacy. And every night he had been gently denied. And for reasons unbeknownst to himself, Will was stopped again now as his mouth moved southward. Hannibal held him firmly by the shoulders and brought Will back to eyelevel. Bright blue eyes and a mischievous smile painted his youthful face. Will bit his lip under the weight of Hannibal’s stare.

Hannibal returned his smile, the heady scent of Will’s arousal pleasing to him. He was well aware of his willful apprentice’s particular frustrations, and Hannibal’s subtle refusals were deliberate. It had begun as a game, Hannibal teasing him with touches each night, letting him draw close, and then making him stop. Hannibal’s aim was not to be unduly cruel, but this new facet of his life felt fragile and it was to be approached slowly and with utmost care. He wanted Will to be desperate with want for him. So each night Hannibal kissed and touched, and then swallowed his own burgeoning urge, time and again, savoring the tension as it grew beastly between them.

When the moment arrived, and their joining demanded itself upon them from sheer tumultuous need, Will would cling helplessly to him, and Hannibal would know him fully,

and know the holy satisfaction of his absolute possession.

But in the meantime, he wished to treasure the pure moments of sweet lust that swelled between them when Will met him with eager kisses and sighs. They had their whole supernaturally long lives to tear into each other, and Hannibal would draw it out as much as he could stand.

A bittersweet game.

The witchers maintained their sensual doze until the sun began to glint on the horizon. Then together they rose for the day. Will was especially eager that morning, for Hannibal had promised to teach him his first witcher sign casting.

By the time they had washed and dressed, one seeing the other into their clothes with flirtatious fingers, Will had almost completely forgotten the figure in the cloak.

Will was sweaty again.

But Hannibal was relentless.

“I thought you were teaching me magic today,” he complained as he caught the blunt of Hannibal's blade with his studded gauntlet. The older witcher had been drilling him with swordplay for the better part of an hour, straining Will's weak spots, and he was tiring despite his mutated strength. He could not predict Hannibal's movements the way he could predict a monster, and it made him groan with aggravation when Hannibal knocked him off his feet for the zillionth time.

“Stop depending on guesswork and watch me, Will,” Hannibal ordered, offering his hand to the boy in the dirt. Will ignored the courtesy and lifted himself to his feet.

“Oh, I'm watching you,” he insisted with a telling grin. He jolted forward, straight into Hannibal's superior counterattack, and was swatted away with an ease that pulled a snarl from his throat. Hannibal laughed at him, clearly delighted, and beckoned him with his blade.

“You have the instincts, Will, but you're resting on your powers of mind. Though undeniably remarkable, it would seem to be no match for me. Therefore, you must train your body to the same heightened reactions. Some monsters you fight will be human, and you will need the honed responses of a witcher, not the innate foresight of a fisherman son's pre-cognizant prodigy.”

“Stop talking and fight me, then,” Will said, and he feigned a strike with his sword before spinning in the other direction, aiming the hilt to connect against Hannibal's shoulder blade. He was too slow, of course, and Hannibal tsk-tsked him and trapped his arms behind his back, causing the boy's hold on his sword to weaken. The blade clattered uselessly to the ground.

“Is my future opponent going to be kissing my neck like that, too?” Will asked, amused. He felt Hannibal's smile spread against his skin. His breath cooled the sweat on Will's neck.

“No one else will kiss you and live,” Will was assured, and Hannibal released his hold to spin the boy back to facing him. The sword lay between them. Will did not reach for it. He kept his eyes trained to Hannibal.

“Retrieve your weapon,” Hannibal said.

Will hesitated, then shook his head.

Hannibal’s golden eyes flashed dark. “All week you've been dying for a chance to kneel before me. You would deny me now?”

A furious blush bloomed across Will's cheeks. It was true that he wanted to sink to his knees and forget the sword and the practice and everything but the man so all-consuming before him. But it was a trick, so he banished the tempting picture forming in his mind and shook his head. “You're goading me to reach for my sword, and then you'll ...do something.”

“What do you imagine I will do?” Hannibal asked, muscle twitching beneath his eye. Will distrusted that twitch.

“Something painful,” answered Will.

“Is that what you think or what you hope?”

Will laughed, taken aback. He licked his lips, knowing it would draw Hannibal’s attention, and then he kicked out his foot and sent the sword sliding out from between them. As quickly as he could, Will fell into a roll, grabbing the sword and managing to jump to his feet before he felt the tip of steel against his throat. Hannibal teased a pearl of blood from the tender skin before retracting the weapon.

“Better,” he praised.

Will took the hand offered to him this time, and Hannibal pulled the boy into his arms. Will touched his finger to collect the single drop of blood from his throat, and then smeared it over Hannibal's sharp cheekbone to illicit a charming grunt of disapproval.

“I don't think my opponents will distract me with innuendo, Hannibal. Maybe I should seek training elsewhere? The Lodge perhaps? I hear they offer a continental breakfast. Sans pointy swords.”

Hannibal growled and planted a claiming kiss on Will's shoulder. “Am I to lose you to the sorceresses after all?”

Will shrugged innocently.

“Fine,” Hannibal sighed with affected annoyance. “Put down your sword and I will show you a witcher’s modest magic.”

“A novel idea,” Will said, and Hannibal fought the pull of his lips as they threatened a smile.

“Already so demanding in your old age,” he clucked. “Have a drink of water, and we will begin.”

“I’m demanding?” scoffed Will, though he did as he was told and took a deep pull from his canteen.

He wiped the stray water from his lips and took a moment to appreciate the witcher currently bent over with his back turned, fussing with his pack. Hannibal insisted on training shirtless, much to Will’s chagrin, because it meant he had to look and not touch, or touch and then stop touching. But ever since he had been imbued with his witcher mutations, Will could sense Hannibal like he’d never been able to before. He still lacked the power to predict him, but what the witcher felt, Will felt, and through his meticulously built veneer of take it or leave it passions, his true intents were blaringly obvious to the younger witcher. More often than not, Will felt as though he might be pounced upon at any moment, and the show of Hannibal’s self-prescribed restraint was endlessly amusing to watch. He wondered vaguely as he surveyed the man’s backside how long Hannibal would be able to resist his wiles. With an inspiring flare of naughtiness, Will carried himself with soft steps to stand behind Hannibal, who was still bent over, fishing in his bag, entirely unaware of Will’s approach until he felt the hands brush over his waist.

Will contained a laugh when he felt the man startle slightly at the unexpected contact.

“May I help you?” Hannibal rumbled, maintaining his bend and not bothering to look over his shoulder at the boy who was surely grinning like a cat.

Will tightened his grip on the man’s hips and pressed himself against Hannibal’s ass. When he heard the sharp hiss of Hannibal’s exhale, he began to grind slow circles against him.

Apparently that wasn’t allowed.

Hannibal reached behind his back and grabbed Will’s arm, yanking him down to the ground beside him. Will tried not to laugh too hard, but between Hannibal’s stern expression and his hot, dizzying mind, it was impossible to keep completely mirthless. But his laugh quickly became a moan when Hannibal put his hand around Will’s neck and kissed him deeply. It ended too soon when he pulled away, but a curious weight around his neck distracted Will from the complaint forming on the tip of his tongue.

He glanced down and a silver shining medallion in the mold of a wolf’s head was sitting heavy against his chest. Will lifted it to hold in the light. Then he looked to Hannibal, words lost to him.

“Your birthday is not until tomorrow, I know,” Hannibal began, “but I wanted to see it on you now.” He touched the medallion, and then let his fingers trail up Will’s throat, along his jaw, to tuck the streak of white behind Will’s ear.

Will swallowed. “And now that you see it on me?” He met Hannibal’s eyes and was reminded that he was merely prey waiting to be consumed.

Hannibal cupped his hand against Will's cheek and rubbed along the rim of his velvet-skinned ear. "It suits you," he said, voice deep and melodic. "You might look like a proper witcher once we head into town tomorrow for your silver sword."

The boy's eyes grew large, but if he'd planned to say anything, he never got the chance, because in the next instant, Hannibal was scooping him up from the ground, placing Will's legs around his waist.

"If you recall, there was a time when I had to force gifts upon you," Hannibal pointed out as he walked them both back into their makeshift training ring. "Now I wonder if your appetite will ever be satisfied."

"If you recall, I warned you that my presence was unbearable," chided Will, gleeful to be so thoroughly wrapped around Hannibal.

"I remember everything you have ever said to me," Hannibal said with a slight smirk as he added, "thanks to you." He ignored Will's groan of dissatisfaction when he slid him to the ground again. "I do not remember, however, you warning me that you were a creature of insatiability."

"I can be sated," Will insisted. "Quite easily, I imagine."

Hannibal cocked his head thoughtfully and looked the young man over. The wolf head medallion gleamed brilliant in the sun, and its owner was beautiful and dangerous. Hannibal was immensely pleased. He cast a chaste kiss on Will's brow. "I imagine it would be quite easy, indeed." He hummed his pleasure before creating a measurable berth between them. "I am harder to satisfy, however, and I will not be contented until you can do this." He waved his hand in front of Will and cast the Aard sign. A shimmering rune appeared in the air and Will was thrown off his feet with a telekinetic blast of energy.

"Argh!" he yelled as he fell on his back with a thud.

"You fall beautifully, dear Will," Hannibal was saying, but Will could barely hear him through the ringing in his head. His mind was aggravated by the blast of magic, and Will felt the beginnings of an electric pulse gathering in his palms. He inhaled slowly, calming his heartbeat, and the thrum subsided. Hannibal was leaning over him with his hand extended. "Come, I will show you."

It was true that Will had the capacity for many things, and magic was one of his greatest natural talents. He learned quickly and his mind harnessed such immense power that after Hannibal's single walkthrough of the sign, Will was casting it himself with perfection. Hannibal stood to the side and smiled proudly as Will arched his hand and sent his satchel flying into a tree.

It was easy, Will thought. It was too easy. And it felt good to commit the busyness of his mind in such a straightforward way. Simpler than reading the emotions of others, less painful than the strange electric shocks he had wreaked upon the djinn. He felt lightness on his shoulders as he turned to Hannibal with a crooked, self-assured grin. Will held out his hand to

summon Hannibal wordlessly to him, and Hannibal was blasted back, meeting the same fate as the satchel, smashed against the trunk of an elm.

“Hannibal!” Will cried, running to the crumpled mass of shirtless witcher. “I didn’t mean to!”

The older man winced as he pushed himself up from against the tree, a cut swelling at his lip where he’d bitten it. His tongue darted out to taste it, eyes glowing fiercely. “I would say you have that one down,” he said as he smoothed back his silver hair and straightened himself back out. “Shall we try another?”

Will took extra strains to stay far away from Hannibal as he mastered the Ignii sign next, and he only singed off a tiny bit of his eyebrows when he started their campfire that evening. For some reason, Hannibal refused to teach him the Axii sign yet, citing his wariness that Will would abuse that particular power of mind control. Will hid his smile behind his hand and declared he had no idea what Hannibal was talking about.

It was a lovely day, and the evening passed just as nicely. Will’s medallion captured a hypnotic luster from the fire, and he enjoyed holding his up beside Hannibal’s to compare. He also enjoyed snaring Hannibal by his medallion’s chain and kissing him so he couldn’t escape. As they sprawled together beside the fire, Will’s leg wrapped shamelessly over Hannibal’s hip, Hannibal’s fingers brushing through Will’s curls, they both felt sated. At least for the moment.

Will let his heavy lids close. His breaths grew deeper as he scented the man beside him, as if he could breathe him into his very dreams.

The djinn exploded in a blast of bright red light that sent Will flying across the ghost cabin. Temple met plank as his body crashed into the water-swollen floor of the wrecked ship. His head rang from the impact, and as he shuffled up from the floor, he had to bite his lip to hold back the rising nausea.

He was back in the dream, but awareness stuck in his mind this time, and he floated through the battle with the djinn with minimal distress. When he was lying amongst the barrels, and the portal appeared, Will did not hide. With a brazen curiosity, he stood and waited for the cloaked figure to approach him.

“Ensh’eass,” the figure said. It did not have to summon Will closer, because he was already stepping forward on his own.

“Why do you call me that?” Will asked.

“Because it is your name,” replied the voice.

Will looked into the shadow of the hood and saw only the shine of electric blue eyes, so much like his own. He wanted to reach out and reveal the face behind the shadow, but a pale hand grasped his arm, as though it had predicted Will’s movements.

“Soon, Ensh’eass,” it said.

Will woke in a sweat, but Hannibal was blessedly deep in meditation and had not stirred. The young witcher pushed the damp hair from his eyes and rolled to his back. The night sky was clear and riddled with stars. He let out a puff of air and fought to suppress the thrum of electricity seeking to escape through his palms.

He stayed that way for several minutes, calming his pulse and his mind, before realizing it was his birthday.

Will was twenty years old.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Wherein poor Will realizes he's too pretty for his own good.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It's beautiful.”

Will balanced the heavy sword in his hands, and Hannibal watched him closely as he stalked a slow path over the intricately carved hilt and placed the faintest of touches upon the long silver blade.

“It better be. We had time enough to perfect it,” complained Brian before cutting an accusatory eye at his co-tailor. “And you know how some people can't let something sit and not keep adding on.”

“I resent that,” said Jimmy. “But it’s true.”

“If it had been here another week you might have gotten it back bedazzled,” said Brian.

Will cocked his head at the tailors. “How long have you been working on this?”

Jimmy glanced at Hannibal to verify his approval and was permitted with a head nod. He squinted and stroked his chin, calculating. Brian rolled his eyes.

“I've been resisting the urge to add tassels to this beauty since the first time you were here,” Jimmy finally said.

“Meanwhile, I actually crafted the thing,” Brian interjected. “Difficult to do while fighting off an overzealous madman with an order of new sequins.”

“I'm passionate about my work, not overzealous.”

“Passionate about sequins,” Brian quipped. “Witchers shouldn’t sparkle.”

“It would have been tasteful,” said Jimmy with a carefree wave.

“It appears our timing is opportune,” Hannibal said with a sideways smile at Will. The young witcher was holding his new silver sword aloft, mesmerized, and Hannibal admired him thoughtfully. Wolf head medallion hanging from his neck, silver and steel, an image of perfection. “How does it feel to you, Will?”

“I feel powerful,” Will answered, voice scarcely above a whisper. Hannibal requisitioned the sword to be made especially for him before...before all of it, and the thought was overwhelming. To some, such a presumptuous gift so soon after their meeting might have smacked of manipulation, but Will couldn't muster the resentment another might have been inclined to feel. He was a witcher now, and the silver in his hands was his final proof. “I also feel relieved that it's not been drenched in glitter or tassels,” Will added.

Jimmy shook his head. “I refuse to be shamed by a witcher who thinks the only suitable material for clothing is leather. That reminds me,” he said, turning to his partner, who arched his brow. “Go get that thing.”

“Why don’t you get it?”

“Because it was my idea to ask you to get it first,” said Jimmy as though it was the most sensible thing said all day. In that shop, maybe it was. Brian sighed, then turned and walked into the back room.

Hannibal stood at Will's back and fastened his second sheath above the first. Then he stepped away, allowing Will the space to slide his silver sword in place with a prideful flourish. He was all white teeth and bright eyes as he flashed appreciation at his companion. “You've finally done it,” Will said. “We’re alike now.”

Hannibal smoothed his hand over the sword handle lovingly. “No,” he admonished. “You are like no one else.”

Will felt the heat rising up from Hannibal, and nearly sank into his arms, but then Brian coughed indiscreetly from the door of the back room.

“Your order is also ready, Will,” he said, his tone one of deep amusement.

“Thank you,” Will said, taking the bundle from the tall tailor. “May I use the room?”

Brian nodded and Will slipped past him into the back room and shut the door. Hannibal held his head in a tilt of intrigue, but refrained from inquiring from the tailors what they were about, preferring to relish in the unexpected bout of suspense. There was rustling from the other side of the door and a comical series of thuds, and when the door finally opened, it was to a room full of eager eyes.

Will emerged, dressed in his new armor, and approached Hannibal. The older witcher was able to keep his face blank only from years of practice, but even then the tell-tale twitch under his eye could not be helped, nor could the automatic sucking in of his lower lip between his teeth.

“When did you have this made?” Hannibal asked in deep dulcet tones.

Will turned around slowly, looking over his shoulder coquettishly to answer through a chestnut wave of curls. “Last week,” he said flippantly. He had slipped in to see the tailors when Hannibal had gone into Novigrad to get supplies. It was after their meeting at the riverbank, and Will’s mind had been filled to the brim with thoughts of Hannibal. He had

wanted to suit him in every way. And by the look on the man's face, his selection of attire suited him well.

Leather, black, soft in some places, hard in others, crafted in slimming weaves and straps. It was a gorgeous fit, an immense improvement to the brown leather vest and leggings Hannibal had purchased for him before.

The young witcher was a vision, Hannibal thought. Flawless. His eyes roamed down Will's figure, body slighter than his own, but strong and lean and wonderful.

Jimmy held his hand over his mouth, but his enthusiasm could not be suppressed. "I take it all back. Leather is the only thing a witcher should ever wear."

"Remember what the customers have said about drooling," Brian fussed.

"Do it, it makes me feel desirable?"

"Exactly."

With no mind for the spectators, Hannibal touched his hand to the small of Will's back, stroking along a line of seamless stitching. He pulled in a sharp breath for Will's ears only, and then turned to politely address the tailors.

"Thank you for your craftsmanship, Jimmy, Brian," he said. "But we shall not darken your doorstep any longer. We have more business to attend to today."

Will knitted his brow as he turned to Hannibal. "Do we?"

Hannibal nodded. "Oh yes. Very serious business," he said, lowering his voice to a secretive hush. "Birthday business."

Will blushed. "But this is my birthday business. The sword and the medallion. It's more than enough."

Hannibal's head turned to the side only once in disagreement. "Come along, Will. Now more than ever I would like to escort you to our next errand."

They bid their goodbyes to the tailors and exited the shop. Will bee-lined for the post to which Winston was tied, and she looked up from her grass snack with a snort. But Hannibal touched his shoulder and guided him away. Will was confused until he noticed he was being veered in the direction of a little inn.

"The Seven Cats?" he asked.

Hannibal hummed.

"You know I don't have my episodes so much anymore but I don't know how I feel about tempting fate like this."

"It's your birthday, and I will buy you a drink, Will."

“Hannibal, you hate taverns. And people. And I hate taverns. And people.”

Hannibal stopped outside the unassuming structure. It was quaint, with flowers winding up the windows. Will could feel the warm blossom of liquor-thick minds inside. Then he felt Hannibal's hands on his face, and he pressed their foreheads together.

“You don't hate me,” Hannibal said, and Will couldn’t keep his breath from hitching.

“I don't think either of us would describe you as a person,” he admitted, tilting his head instinctively.

Hannibal's laugh was sweet heat against his skin. “How would you describe me?”

Will leaned in to kiss him, and the older man leaned away teasingly. “Indescribable,” Will answered after a pause of genuine consideration.

“I want to fill you with expensive wine,” Hannibal said.

“Is that an appropriate usage of time for a witcher and his apprentice?”

Hannibal finally stole his kiss, and Will all but melted into subservience. “Okay,” he said when he was released for air. “We'll do your thing.” He bowed his head to look up through a curtain of untamed curls. “Then we'll do my thing. Since it's my birthday, and it’s only fair.”

Hannibal smirked. “It’s only fair,” he agreed.

They entered the inn. It was already crowded, as every inn with a tavern was always crowded after midday, especially roundabouts Novigrad.

“For the record, I have extremely mixed feelings about this,” Will confessed as Hannibal led them through the crowd to an unoccupied table in the back. Hannibal liked to sit with their backs to the wall in case there was trouble and they had to draw their swords. It was the witcher in him, Will supposed. He liked being against a wall, as well, so he could feel something solid behind him. The cowering fisherman's whelp in him. But the solid weight at his back was a reminder of how Will had traipsed beyond his old life in the swamp, his old self. No longer did he cower. So when he joined Hannibal, backs to the wall in camaraderie, it was as a fellow witcher, and his smile stretched large and genuine.

Hannibal touched his leg beneath the table. “How do you feel, Will?” he asked. For all his bravado, if Will felt unwell in the tavern they would not remain.

Will took a staid measure of his mind. His trouble with crowds barely registered as trouble anymore, surfacing more as a slight discomfort. Following the initial upheaval of his mind after his Trial of Grasses, he had settled himself straight and now found he could sift through crowds, acknowledge them, and cast them aside with relative ease and little pain. It was a relief. But old worries were hard to shake, and he did not think he would ever grow to the point of being truly relaxed amongst the populace.

Still, Hannibal wanted to buy him a drink for his birthday, and it made his heart ache with good cheer.

“I feel thirsty,” he said at last, and Hannibal squeezed Will’s thigh.

“Then allow me to attend you, as it would appear our designated bar wench is busy earning her tips elsewhere.” He kissed the corner of Will’s mouth and disengaged from the table. Will admired him as he walked away. He cut quite the figure.

He admired him as he spoke to the barmaid, narrow hips pushing against the bar, silver hair catching the late afternoon light streaming through the open windows. A breeze floated a thick silver-blond strand over his eyes, and sun-darkened fingers smoothed it back.

He admired him as he returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses, bowed lips pulled into a small smile, eyes crinkling with fondness. As soon as he took his seat, Will moved in swiftly to kiss him and felt Hannibal’s mouth curve into a wider smile beneath his tangible affection.

“I missed you,” Will whispered at his ear when he finally pulled away. “Do you know I think I retroactively miss you for every day of my life you weren’t a part of?”

“I feel the same way,” Hannibal breathed against the boy’s neck, “about that new armor you’re wearing.”

Will laughed, pure and unreserved. “You like it.”

“I do,” Hannibal said, his hand clasping warm around Will’s waist as testimony.

“And you will miss it when it’s gone?” teased Will, letting the other man pull him snug to his side.

“The pleasure of removing it myself should lessen the loss,” returned Hannibal in a rumble Will could feel through his chest.

When Hannibal moved away to open the bottle of wine, Will wanted to snatch his hands back to press against him. But he could practice self-control, same as Hannibal. Will smiled mischievously when he was handed his glass of wine.

“I know when you are plotting, Will,” Hannibal warned, tipping the bottle to fill his own glass.

“I hate to tell you this, Hannibal,” Will said, “but you cannot control my plotting.” He bit his lip. “Or the nature of said plotting. But that’s what you enjoy about me, isn’t it? My unpredictability.”

“Among other things,” Hannibal agreed. He lifted his glass, and Will was reminded of their night dancing in the light of a bonfire. “Happy birthday, Will.”

Their glasses united in a happy clink.

After his first glass, Will stopped darting his eyes at every new body to enter the tavern. After his second glass, his laughs rang freely over the boisterous flautist set up in the center of clapping, jolly patrons. After his third glass, he was putty in Hannibal’s arms. He leaned against him, warm and gorgeously tipsy.

Hannibal kept his hands twisted in the curls at the nape of the boy's neck, generous this evening in his doting. When the musical vagabond took a break to smoke his pipe, however, he extricated himself from his wine-dipped companion.

Will made a noise of protest, but Hannibal shushed him with a quick kiss. "Would you like to go?"

"Winston is probably ready to go," Will said dreamily.

"We would not want to risk her ire," Hannibal said and Will shook his head adamantly that no, they certainly would not. They rose from their table, the younger of the two stretching and releasing an alcohol-laden yawn. It was then Will realized he was overdue for a visit to the water closet.

Hannibal laughed at the information relayed to him by an overly serious, flushing Will. "I will ready Winston and meet you out front."

Will nodded and only tripped once on his way to the inn's lavatory. He struggled briefly with the unfastening of his new leather trousers, but conquered them in the end, and relieved himself with a sigh into one of several pots provided. The rusty shard of a looking-glass was showing Will just how tousled his hair really was when the door swung open and the flautist entered with a stagger. The bearded man had definitely drunk deeply from his cup that evening. Will averted his eyes as he passed for the door, because he always averted his eyes, but the flautist didn't know that. And the flautist was offended.

"You there," the man said, and Will realized he was much taller than he'd appeared when sitting with his flute. "What's your problem?"

A muddled number of seconds crawled by as Will's fuzzy head discerned the man's question. "My problem?"

"That's right, beautiful," he said. "Too pretty to even bear looking at the likes of me?"

Will scowled and cautioned a glance at the man invading his space. He checked the wall in his mind and it was sturdy, but he could feel a vileness creeping up like wicked vines. The man was toxic, and he was too close. And Will's prevalent trait had never been social grace, even at the best of times, so he replied with unchecked cheek, "My problem is I'd like to leave and you're in my way."

When he was slammed against the wall, he decided that must have been the wrong response.

"And you think whatever the pretty boy in his pretty clothes wants, he gets?" the man asked. He stood close enough for Will to be offended by his foul breath. "What about what I want? Hmm?" he asked.

The audacity of people often surprised Will, their capacity for vulgarity and vandalism often unhinging him. And the young witcher felt mortally vandalized when the drunken flautist became a handsy flautist and grasped Will roughly by the belt.

Will didn't think twice before slamming a sharp elbow into the man's bulbous nose, nor did he feel guilty when he heard the satisfying crunch. "What makes you think I care what you want?" Will spat. He shoved the man aside, hands held to his face to catch the flow of bright blood.

Free from the confines of the room, Will took a moment to collect himself, exorcise the man's crawly vines from his mind's wall, and steady his spiking pulse. He felt the tremor of a spark course through his fingertips, but after a beat of concentration, it subsided, and Will began to finagle his way through the crowd of people towards the exit.

And he was close, he was so close when the bloody hand sank dirty fingernails into his shoulder and pulled him backward. Will yelled and almost toppled, but his witcher's stealth sent him twisting in midair like a cat, and his booted feet landed silently on the sticky tavern floor. A hush swept over the tavern as the broken nosed flautist and Will faced each other.

"Think I don't know a witcher when I see one?" the man demanded, bubbles of blood obfuscating his words. Several patrons gasped, and Will felt an unsettling number of eyes fixating on his face. He knew his pupils were narrow and strange, catlike, that his irises gleamed a shocking blue. And he knew how dangerous they looked when narrowed, his head lowered, his fists clenched, his body tensed and poised. A wild thing, Hannibal had once said.

"He broke my nose!" the vagabond yelled to the onlookers. "This puff attacked me when I turned him down!" He pointed a finger into Will's chest.

Will grabbed the man's wrist and twisted, not enough to break but more than enough to hurt. "You don't want to talk to me like that," Will warned. "Or touch me again."

"You may be a witcher, but you're a stick twink," he hollered obnoxiously. Will let the man break free from the hold on his wrist. "Ha! Think I'm afraid of you?"

"Maybe not," Will growled. "But I'll bet you're afraid of him." He arched his eyebrow, and the increasingly belligerent musician turned around to follow Will's gaze.

Hannibal stood there, tall, elegant, and oozing menace. "Good evening," he said.

The man barked a laugh in the witcher's face. "Good evening! Does it look like I've had a good evening?!"

"You are drunk, and you have offended my companion," Hannibal said, his polite tone contrasting fiercely with the terrible glow in his eyes. "I suggest you return to your playing before the situation grows out of hand."

Will watched with fascination as the man spit on Hannibal's shoes. "Think I can play now with my nose gushing?"

"I fail to see how your playing could get any worse," was Hannibal's cool reply. "Perhaps you should consider this incident an opportunity to find a more suitable career path."

“Or me and my mates can have a go at teaching you and your boy-slut some manners.” The man gestured to a group of equally dirty men, spindly and hilariously nonthreatening.

Hannibal’s head tilted, his eyes sparkled, and he glanced at Will with a flash of amusement as if to say ‘Why do people always try to start fights with witchers?’ Will shrugged. Then he smiled.
And that was all Hannibal required before he turned back to the drunk and punched him squarely in his already broken nose.

The man cried and fell back, but already his group of friends, unexpectedly loyal, were descending upon the witchers.

“Unbelievable,” Hannibal said, but he raised his fists in front of him, ready and willing to brawl.

The tavern was ready for it, too, and in a wave of violent energy, the whole room erupted into a bungle of fists and teeth, kicks and snarls, with Hannibal and Will at its epicenter. Will had never been in a bar fight, and as he threw himself shoulder-first into an angry drunk, he realized this situation might not be the best for his occasionally delicate disposition of mind.

“Hannibal,” he yelled over his shoulder at the silver streak of brawn throwing an assailant to the floor. Will felt an uprising of panic in his chest, but when he tried retreating to his mind to reinforce his wall, someone caught his chin with a jaunting hook, and he was rattled from his attempt to calm himself. He pushed back at a kicking body, trying to breathe and failing. The violence in the room was astounding and it bludgeoned his senses.

It wasn’t right. It couldn’t be happening. He had been fine for so many months, but he felt it now, slithering and black, the dark blanket of hate and unspent energy all clambering to break into Will’s skull and shatter it.

He tried to yell Hannibal’s name again, but his words choked in his throat, and his rapidly beating heart began to pulse through his arms, into his palms, like an electric current. A man slammed a broken chair leg against Will’s stomach, and he lifted his hands to block him, but when he did, the man flew back, hitting his head against the far wall of the inn.

Will gaped, shocked, but his dismay only reinforced the pulse of power rushing through his veins. He closed his eyes. The room was a den of madness, and he stood in the middle like a gathering storm. He tried to steady himself, control his breath, but he couldn’t. Every time he tried, he was stopped by a push, a shove, an elbow. He crossed his arms protectively over his chest against a flurry of fists.

When Hannibal finally spied him, the crowd having jostled them to opposite sides of the room, Will was being knocked to the ground. Hannibal pushed the man in front of him and ran for Will, but he was too late. The bloody-nosed flautist was lowering a dirty boot to crush Will’s neck. Hannibal yelled for him, and could only watch helplessly as the boot descended.

Will’s eyes opened, crackling blue, and he caught the boot before it landed. From his position on his back, he raised his other hand and a jet of flame burst from a shimmering Ignii sign.

Breathless and out of control, Will jumped from the floor and watched as the flautist burned alive.

The tone of the room changed in a heartbeat, and the fighting grunts evolved into horrified screams. Will stared at his hand. He had not meant to do it.

Had he?

The blast of fire had shot straight up, and the roof was on fire.

Bodies rushed around him, and he was almost knocked to the floor beneath a stampede of feet before Hannibal swept him up and blazed a path to the exit.

The Seven Cats Inn was burning.

Hannibal carried a shocked Will through the flow of panicked patrons bottlenecking to escape the conflagration. He did not stop until they reached Winston, still tethered to the post beside the tailor shop. Jimmy and Brian were sitting outside sharing a pipe and a bottle of peach brandy when they saw Hannibal throwing the boy into the saddle.

“Where’s the fire?” Jimmy joked, and Brian smacked him in the arm.

“Probably the same place that plume of smoke is,” he said, and Jimmy raised his brows in surprise.

“You two okay?” Brian was asking, but Hannibal was already jumping in the saddle behind Will, and with a click of his tongue, Winston galloped away.

When they had ridden far enough to no longer see the lights of the city through the trees, Hannibal told Winston to stop, and then slid from her back. Will was shaking, his eyes wide, and he nearly fell from the loss of weight against him, but Hannibal caught him with deft hands and set him on the forest floor.

“Will, breathe,” he said gently. “You’re having an episode.”

Through his uncontrollable trembling, Will was able to shake his head. “No,” he said. “It’s different.”

And it was different. The people around him had clouded his mind and pained him, spurring him into a panic. But what tipped him over the threshold had been the pulsing electricity pounding in his brain, burning up his skin, making him lift his hands with fiery violence and burn a man alive.

“Listen to me, Will,” Hannibal was saying. His hands held the boy steady. “You are safe. Breathe.”

Will kept shaking his head, hyperventilating and quaking between Hannibal’s grasp.

“You will pass out if you remain in this state. Breathe properly, Will. Try for me, or I will have to use Axii to calm you before you injure yourself.”

Will's oxygen deprived brain barely understood Hannibal's words, but a new wave of fear steamrolled through him. He could barely control himself. He saw the man lifting his hand to hold in front of Will, a slight frown etched on his face.

"No," Will said, and he grasped Hannibal's hand in his own and threw himself on top of him.

Hannibal's breath drew ragged beneath a heated, desperate kiss, and when he finally managed to pry Will away, the younger man inhaled deeply. He sat straddling Hannibal, chest heaving to catch his breath. The firm touch of the man beneath him began to ground the blue sparks spider-webbing through his brain. The thrum began to relent in his palms.

Hannibal watched as Will began to suck sufficient air, and his fingers dug deep into the needy thighs encasing him.

"Will?" he asked, his voice coated with concern and heavy with something far darker.

But Will was already lowering himself into another hungry kiss, demanding against the warm body beneath him. Hannibal's hands snaked around his waist, and he rolled Will swiftly to his back. The boy stared just past him, wide-eyed and startled, and Hannibal brushed his knuckles over his face, past a bruise forming blue on his jaw.

Will wanted to scream. He saw the fire burning bright behind his eyes, and he saw the man stricken with terror when the licks of flame engulfed him, and it was too much. He grabbed Hannibal's hair, fisting tight around his smooth locks of silver, coal-gray in the dimming moon, and rocked against him. He gasped when Hannibal set his body heavy against his own, his teeth scraping against his neck. Will escaped into the heat of the man as he was surrounded by strong arms and sure hands and the sharp edge of hips setting a pace with his own.

Quick fingers released the straps of his swords from his chest, and he felt himself lifted for an instant, the weapons tossed aside, and then Will was pushed into the ground with insistent nuzzles. He could feel Hannibal in his mind, a hot darkness closing around him, and the spark of electricity was returning and coursing in his ears, and he gripped the older man's hips with a frantic strength, rutting, mindless, drowning.

Hannibal was a slave to the boy beneath him, his devious game of restraint blown from his mind with a furious wind. He buried his face into sweet smelling curls and his heart was set to bursting in his chest. Hands searched manically, blindly for the clasp of a belt, Will's or his own he could not say. Will groaned beneath him, and then a sudden light bloomed across the men as they held each other together in the dew-damp grass. A flash and Hannibal lifted his head to the light.

He cursed in alarm at the portal, jumping to his feet, pulling Will up and shielding him as he drew his sword, silver or steel, his mind was so far behind his body he did not know. Will shuddered behind him, and both stood rapt as the portal grew, a great blue door of magical light.

And then a cloaked figure stepped through.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone can thank Cat_Eyes for Will's fancy new outfit ;)

Chapter 3

Will was dreaming.

The scene playing before his eyes couldn't be real.

He had lost grip of his senses in the tavern brawl and was experiencing a vivid nightmare.

A pale hand crept from the hooded figure’s sleeve, thin fingers curling.

"Ensh'eass," it beckoned, and the atmosphere crackled around Will like the held breath before a thunderstorm.

Hannibal, bearing his sword before him, called to the figure hidden in shadow, “What business does one of the Alder have here?”

Will’s forehead creased at the unfamiliar word, and he craned his neck to spy his companion’s face, wanting terribly to match expression to voice, but the man was turned away from him, his broad back blocking Will from the tall figure ahead. Will felt the tension rolling from the older man in suffocating waves.

“It's okay, Hannibal,” he said. “He will speak to me, and then I will wake.”

Golden eyes narrowed over a sleek shoulder as Hannibal spared him a glance, an unexpected confusion upsetting the customary stoicism of his brow.

The figure called forth their attention as he repeated the strange words from Will’s dream yet again. “Ensh'eass, come here.”

“He does not know the elder speech, elf. What is your business?” Hannibal demanded of the unwelcome arrival, but the summons had snared Will fully, and he was at once stepping around the witcher, feet moving him toward the cloaked figure. Hannibal caught his wrist and held him back.

“Step aside, vatt'ghern. I am not here for you,” came the voice, deeply melodious and sending prickles over Will’s flesh.

He felt Hannibal’s hold on his wrist tighten protectively. Will blinked as if to clear the daunting truth from his eyes. The scene before him, he began to realize, was unlike the other dreams on the ship. Hannibal had never been there, never held him back from seeking the electric blue eyes hidden by shadow, twins to his own.

Will took Hannibal’s hand and gave it a soft squeeze. “This is real,” he said, and Hannibal stole him a look, his eyes bright with worry.

“I have come for you,” the voice said with its lyrical drone, but Will shook his head and forced himself to take a step back, holding tighter to Hannibal. But he wanted to go to him,

felt the need strong in his bones to obey.

It was all wrong. He smothered the electric spark surging beneath his skin and allowed himself to be grounded through the heat of Hannibal's hand. "What are you?" Will braved when he was finally able to reclaim his voice.

"You know this elf?" Hannibal asked quietly at his side, and Will shook his head.

"Only from my dreams," he answered, and then he directed his attention to the supposed elf, still cloaked in darkness despite the light of its portal sweeping in a bountiful radius over the forest floor. "What is ensh'eass?"

Hannibal answered first. "It is elder speech, language of the Aen Elle. It means stunning, beautiful."

The cloaked figure answered as well. "And magical."

Will swallowed the heavy lump building fast in his throat.

The pale hand reached for him still. "It is your name."

"You're mistaken," Will whispered. He felt a pop beneath his fingers where he held Hannibal's hand and quickly released his too-tight grip. "My name is Will."

"In this world," responded the elf. "But in the world of your people, you are Ensh'eass."

Silence.

Hannibal looked at Will, and Will looked at Hannibal. Both considered the possibility that they were dreaming.

But when the portal snapped shut, and the figure was still standing there, and it was lowering its hood, Will knew that he was awake.

"I'm sorry, what?" Will asked, expression contorted with a bewilderment that might have been comical under different circumstances.

"You are Ensh'eass of the Aen Elle, and I am here to reclaim you."

Before Will could wrap around the words, Hannibal was rushing forward with his sword. "You will not lay a hand on him, elf!" he cursed, but the Alder cast him aside with a mere flick of his hand. Will felt the jolt of power as invisible chains warped the air surrounding Hannibal, and he fell like a stone to the ground, motionless.

"Hannibal!" Will yelled, but his companion was rendered mute and left snarling silently in response. He remembered his swords tossed aside in their previous minute's passion, and made to reach for them, but the elf sent them flying with another turn of his wrist.

"I will not harm him. Leave him be and heed my words," it commanded.

Will's patience wore thin as a helpless confusion wracked his brain. He looked at Hannibal, bound and immobile on the ground, and his eyes narrowed with anger. “Have your words, then, and leave,” Will hissed at the elf, lifting his chin to address him. “He called you Alder. Is that what you are?”

“In the elder speech, the language of our people, I am Aen Elle.” Will stared into the bright blue eyes from his dream, the smooth, pale face they set upon. “You feel it. The familiarity of family.”

Will shook his head automatically. The Alder stepped forward and held a hand out to Will. “You have a special gift. You feel the hearts and minds of those around you. As I do.”

“I’m nothing like you,” Will said. “I'm human.”

“Yes,” the other agreed. “And you are Aen Elle.”

“No,” Will said. “That's impossible.” His eyes were wondrously wide; his voice was wrought with disbelief. “I’m the son of a fisherman.”

“You are my son.”

“No,” Will said as his vision began to dance black around the edges. “No.”

“I know you believe me, because we are the same, and I can feel you, Ensh'eass. Like I felt you across worlds. Your strength is building. It is time to return to your home.”

“You're not my father,” Will said with tightening fists. “My father is a drunkard in a swamp. I’m human, and a witcher, and I am already home.” His gaze found Hannibal, whose ashen hair fell unkemptly across his eyes. Will longed to brush it back.

“I see you need time, but time is short. Your power becomes harder for you to control with every passing moon. Tell me you don’t feel it,” the Alder said, and Will saw himself throwing Hannibal against the tree, setting the tavern on fire. He felt the pulse of power coursing through him even now, fighting for release. “Come with me and learn to control the gifts of your people.”

“Stay away from me,” shouted Will, all the while fighting the urge he felt in his feet to walk forward. “Let Hannibal go!”

“The spark plagues you even now,” the elf acknowledged, its eyes piercing through Will’s own. “It cannot be contained, Ensh'eass. The time will come when you see my words for truth. Say my name when that happens, and I will return for you.”

“That won't happen,” Will said.

The Alder blinked slowly, heavy lids sliding over blue ice. “Auberon. Speak it, and I will come for you, child.”

“I won't,” Will said, and Auberon slipped the hood back into place and returned through the portal.

When it disappeared and the forest was returned to its shade of night, Hannibal's restraints shattered. Will ran to his side.

“Hannibal,” he whispered. The witcher rose to rest on his elbows, a visage of calm now that he could move freely.

“You did not tell me that part of your dream,” he said. His tone was not rife with anger or blame, but it held a chilliness that sent a bolt of regret through Will's chest.

“I didn't think it was worth telling,” he confessed weakly. They stared at one another. Then Hannibal snorted and Will released his held breath on a laugh. “Evidently I was wrong.”

“Evidently.” Hannibal’s hand found a curl twisting rebelliously over Will's eyes, and he tucked it tenderly behind an ear. “You are unhurt?” he asked.

Will nodded. “And you?”

Hannibal raised a pale brow. “My only ailment is my worry for you. It is the truth, what the elf said.”

Will bit his lip. “We have the same eyes,” he said softly, fearing overt vocalization and the power it stoked in his words. “My mind, Hannibal. The way I am...could this be why?”

“Could you be half elf? A race known for its beauty and elevated thinking?” he asked with a tilt of his head. “A glance at your face makes me think it not too far-fetched an origin story. I never did believe you belonged in a Velen swamp.”

“If it’s true, and I’m not saying it is, then how did it come to be? And why claim me now? When I have finally found-” he stammered awkwardly, “- a life I love?”

Hannibal’s lips tugged into a fond smile. “Because it is a life, and it is almost as unpredictable as you, Ensh'eass.”

“Don't call me that.”

“Will,” Hannibal amended, and then he asked, “What will you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“You have just received news that you are half Aen Elle, a son from another world, with a father come to reclaim you. Would you not cast aside this life to seek a more fulfilling one elsewhere?” Hannibal kept his voice calm, his heart steady, but Will could feel his worry, skillfully suppressed though it was. He brought his lips to the man's cheek and whispered against his skin.

“I told you, I have love for this world, and no other.”

“The world is ever-changing, Will,” Hannibal cautioned.

“Some things in the world are,” Will agreed. He kissed Hannibal's mouth. “Other things are not.”

Hannibal offered a half smile. “Tell me what you wish, dear Will, and I will strive to make it so.”

“I want to forget this happened,” Will said, clasping Hannibal’s hand in his. “I want to go into town tomorrow, find a monster contract, and kill something. And I never want to speak of this again. I'm a witcher. And that is all I want to be.”

A pause, and then Hannibal leaned into the young man beside him, letting his lips drag across the quickened pulse of his throat. “Then let it be a dream,” he sighed against Will’s skin. “And tomorrow we will find for you a toothy distraction.” A laugh escaped him and heated Will’s neck. “Though not in Novigrad, because you set it on fire, and I fear our presence would not be welcome.”

“Oh no,” Will groaned. “I had almost forgotten.”

“No worries, Will. It was only an inn. It needed redecorating anyway.”

So ended Will’s twentieth birthday, huddled in the dirt next to Hannibal, trying to eradicate the memory of a father stamped across his mind.

“Master Witcher! Master Witcher!”

Hannibal looked down from his borrowed height atop Winston’s back to an elderly woman bent over a basket of fish. He crinkled his nose, but clicked for the mare to stop. Discreetly, he pressed his nose into the sweet smell of Will's curls before slinking down from the saddle.

The woman was with a noticeable hunch, but her face reflected beauty from another time, and despite her age, her eyes, the color of burnt umber, were intelligent and stubborn. Her stern expression brought a pleased twitch to the edges of Hannibal’s mouth as he approached her. She sat outside of her little shamble house gutting her fish and discarding their innards into an increasingly foul bucket.

“Master Witcher,” the old woman sighed as he leaned against the weathered wood fence bordering her yard. “Thank you for stopping. Most folk pretend not to see someone like me. They keep on riding by with nary a glance.”

The witcher bowed his head to the woman, an infinitesimal movement, but it was more than he offered to most, and Will smiled at the display from his place on Winston’s back.

“It just so happens my partner and I are in need of people in need. Shall I presume you are in need of a witcher’s skills?”

For the first time, the woman noticed Will sitting regally in the saddle, dark curls caught up by a flattering wind in a whirl around his comely face. He returned her look with a generous grin, and was made grateful when the woman did not gasp at the sight of his eerie eyes. Nor

had she reacted as such to Hannibal. This was a woman familiar with witchers, he deduced with an inaudible sigh of relief.

“Two witchers, do I spy?” she asked them. “Rare enough to get one through here, but two? If I was a younger woman, I'd ... Well now's as good a time as then isn't it? Would you boys like some tea?”

“Will not your fish suffer from your absence?” Hannibal asked the woman. Will noted that her hair shared a shade with Hannibal's, but where his glistened with striped silvers and golds, hers was dulled and cottoned by her years. Still, it was enough to enamor the younger witcher. He slid out of Winston's saddle and joined Hannibal's side at the old rail fence.

“I would love some tea.”

Beside him, Hannibal sighed softly enough that only Will could discern it, and it proved only to broaden Will's own expression of delight.

The woman examined both faces, handsome and beautiful, before shaking her head. “Oh, I couldn't be bothering such busy, important witchers such as you with tea time. Not when there's so much trouble afoot in the bog. It would be selfish of me.”

That raised Will's eyebrows. They had traveled southeast since Novigrad. He knew they would be in the poorer areas of Velen soon, but not so swiftly had he thought they would be returned through the swamps of his childhood. He bowed his head to assess the basket of fish at the woman's feet. Fat, flat, brown fish, from the swamps. The only thing Will ever ate for the majority of his rotten life, before the night Hannibal came.

“What trouble in the bog, miss?” Will asked. He had always heard tale of something wicked in the heart of the swampy stretch of southern land, but never saw more than a shadow of a nekker while huddled in the shack with his father.

His father, he thought with a dizzying realization, who was not his father. He cast the thought aside, burying it deep.

“There has been talk of children going amiss,” the woman said with a dip into the theatrical with her scratchy voice. “Some young ones have gone into the swamp and not returned.”

Hannibal nodded. “A swamp can be a treacherous place, even for a man grown. There are a number of things to keep a child from ever retuning home after such a venture.”

“Is it Crookback Bog these children have disappeared from?” Will interrupted.

The old woman squinted at him. “Are you from around here? You look a sight familiar now that I look at you up close.”

Will shied away. “I'm merely familiar with the area,” he answered self consciously. He felt a bloom of warmth as Hannibal touched his gloved hand to the small of his back. A distracting pressure.

“And what about Crookback Bog makes you mention it now?” Hannibal asked Will with genuine interest. He was infinitely interested by everything Will had to say. Always.

“Rumours have always surrounded the bog,” Will began, with a look at the woman who nodded her agreement. “There's an orphanage of sorts there, in Crookback.”

He did not mention how he had stayed there for a time when he was very young and his father had left for a job. To do what, Will had never been sure. But six months later when his father returned for him, it was the most shocked Will had ever been. Because surely, he had thought, he would be abandoned there forever.

Will was still shocked by his father’s return.

That word again. Father. It sat smoldering in a corner of his mind, but he turned his attention away from it, and pulled his full focus to the woman. “Children, on occasion, went missing from Crookback. I wonder, miss,” he said with a withering look, “whether or not our rumours have been borne from the same danger?”

The woman arched a thick, graying eyebrow. “I wonder.”

“Well, now I'm very curious,” Hannibal said under his breath to bring a smile to Will’s lips.

“The crones of Crookback Bog,” Will said. The woman nodded sagely, neat bun wobbling from its perch on her head.

“The crones. Aye, Master Witcher.”

Hannibal smiled. “Ah. The hags of Velen. Even I have heard tale of them. They eat children.”

Will threw Hannibal a bemused glance, and then asked, “Is there a contract on the crones?”

She laughed, but it turned into a cough that she veiled behind a veiny hand. “No one around here has money for contracts.”

Will could feel the exasperation radiating from Hannibal, though he did well to mask it when he responded. “I am afraid good will alone leaves my partner’s belly empty,” he said, tilting his head at Will. “And as you can see, he can barely stand to miss another meal.”

“He does look a delicate creature,” agreed the woman, and Will grit his teeth with hidden humor. “I wish I had the means of paying you, sweet boys that you are,” the old woman continued, “but now you know what dangers lurk in the swamp, and if you continue on that way, you’ll keep your eyes out.”

“That we will, miss,” Will said, tugging Hannibal’s arm to lead them back to the horse. “Thank you for making us aware.”

“You get that boy something to eat,” the woman whispered loudly to Hannibal, and she pressed close enough to the witcher to slip something into his satchel.

“A pleasant day to you,” Hannibal said with a nod of his head. To Will’s dismay he then grabbed him by the waist and lifted him to sit in the saddle. Once he was elegantly mounted himself, he clicked his tongue and with a final goodbye to the woman they trotted on down the road.

“I think I will smell fish all day now,” Will complained when they were out of hearing distance.

“That’s only because she slipped a fish into my satchel,” Hannibal said, and Will could hear the smile in his voice. “You are a growing boy, after all.”

“If I could go the rest of my life without eating swamp fish, I would be happy,” Will exclaimed, and Hannibal pulled his fingers through the boy’s loose curls.

“But I’m to provide my boy something to eat,” Hannibal murmured into his neck.

“You were also to provide me with a toothy distraction today,” sighed Will. “Twenty is already proving to be full of disappointments.” Will yelped in surprise when he felt Hannibal nip against his skin. “Are you to be the monster I kill, then?” Will asked. He shifted in the saddle to lean his weight against Hannibal’s chest, and the man responded by wrapping a strong arm around Will’s waist to press even closer.

“If I must die,” the older witcher whispered against Will’s throat, “let me die by your hands.”

Will squirmed in the saddle to feel Hannibal’s grip tighten around him. “I can think of better uses for my hands,” he said, his voice low. He turned his head to the side, seeking, and Hannibal kissed him gently on the mouth. “Let’s make camp early today,” Will said, “and I will show you.”

Hannibal clicked for Winston to stop, and she pulled to the side of the secluded road. The witchers slid from her saddle. Hannibal lifted Will up and threw him over his shoulder. The younger man laughed and play-swatted at Hannibal’s back as he was carried into the cover of trees.

“Is that one of your hands’ uses?” Hannibal asked, and Will abandoned his playful slaps. He began to rub instead, a pleasant pressure.

“That’s one,” Will said, and Hannibal smacked his bottom, quick and hard. “Hey!”

“I get one, too,” Hannibal said. He laughed as Will struggled over his shoulder. He let him slide down to stand on his own feet, but Will was insistent in the moment, and he sought closeness at his release, sinking into Hannibal, chest to chest, hips to hips. Will brought his hands to the silver strands and pulled his fingers through slowly, scratching lightly with his nails.

“Another use,” Will teased. He stood on his toes and placed a kiss on Hannibal’s jaw, rough with neglected stubble. The older man hummed his approval.

“Show me another,” he said, and Will slid his hands down his chest, and wrapped them around to grip Hannibal’s backside.

Hannibal responded in kind, pinning Will heavily against him, walking him backwards until Will’s back met against the solid bark of a tree trunk. At the feeling of support behind him, Will automatically responded by lifting his legs, and Hannibal’s hands grasped beneath his knees to hold him up. Thighs tightened around Hannibal’s waist and he breathed hot against Will’s neck, kissing him, biting. He remembered his game of self-inflicted anticipation, but the needy little noises from Will made him forget and he rolled his hips against him.

Will grinned at Hannibal’s enthusiasm and returned his own, letting their rhythms sync. The bark of the tree scratched at the back of his neck, and he groaned. Hannibal’s mouth found his.

A sudden pulse in Will’s hand began to thrum as he palmed against Hannibal. Will ignored it. He pressed more firmly, pulling a sigh from Hannibal's lips.

Hannibal’s fingers were digging into the flesh of Will’s thighs, spreading him, pushing him against the tree roughly. Will closed his eyes to drift in the consuming touch.

The air crackled around them. Hannibal didn’t notice, didn't stop his openmouthed kisses over Will’s collarbone, but Will noticed. He noticed when the atmosphere sparked, and the phantom heart in his hand began to beat wildly with restless energy.

He tried to swallow it down, the sensation of power stacking high in his mind, but the pulse evaded his efforts. It grew with every scratch of bark against Will’s skin, with every thrust of hips, and kiss, and sigh.

“Hannibal,” Will breathed against him, tone lost somewhere between a plea and worship.

Will was full and pounding electric, his nerve-endings were on fire. He called out, reaching for Hannibal’s mind with his own. Bright blue coiled around red as their minds joined, and something snapped hot, shocking them both.

Hannibal dropped Will and collapsed to the ground.

“Hannibal?” Will asked, breath ragged with power and want. He set his hand to the other man, his palm still beating supernaturally beneath his skin. Tingles shot through him as he traced over Hannibal’s face. Eyes closed, mouth slack. Unresponsive.

“Hannibal?!” Will shook his shoulders, but the man was unconscious beneath him. Will almost screamed when the realization struck him.

He had done this.

The air still crackled in the space around him, and Will backed away from Hannibal, horrified. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. He waited for the golden eyes to flutter open, but they did not. Hannibal barely looked to be breathing.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. He tripped over a root and fell to his back. When his hands struck the leaves beneath him, they sparked and a tiny fire flared. Will jumped in surprise and beat the fire out with a smothering fist.

His fist was smoking. His head pounded. Hannibal was motionless.

Will cried out into the empty forest.

“Auberon!”

Chapter 4

Hannibal woke, and with his first moment of renewed consciousness, he parted his lips and sighed, “Will?”

He longed for familiar fingers against his cheek and the tickle of curls across his brow as he kissed his apprentice. But Will was not there. Hannibal was lying alone on the forest floor, and his boy was nowhere in sight. He inhaled deeply through his nose and scowled; he could not scent him.

He remained still and traced the evening in his memory. He remembered the hardness shared between pressing bodies, and the softness of breath and skin, the touches of his dark haired companion, the muscles of his thighs spreading taut against his waist. And then a jolt. Sudden, sharp pain.

And then nothing.

A panic blossomed in Hannibal's chest and he sat up slowly, leaning on his hands. Keen eyes scanned his surroundings. Will's swords were gone. His pack was gone. Winston snorted a dozen yards away, and Hannibal almost asked her, ‘Did you see where he went?’ But he stopped himself. He dragged himself to standing, surprised by the slight tremor streaking through his muscles, like aftershocks of a powerful spell-casting.

He wondered at the shaking sensation, wondered if that was how Will’s body felt when he had his episodes. Uncontrollable shakes, outside his realm of control. Hannibal disliked the sensation greatly. He stood, bouncing back and forth on the heels of his boots until the tremors ceased.

But when the distractions of his body left him, Hannibal was faced with his newest reality. Will was gone.

What felt like only moments before, Will had been cradled tightly against his chest, and now he was gone? Hannibal leaned low to scoop up his pack, and then he clicked his tongue for Winston.

Will was gone.

But Hannibal would find him.

“He will not find you here, Ensh'eass.”

Will nodded, head bowed miserably low as he followed the Alder through the strange hallway. Mounted torches cast heavy shadows ahead of his feet as he kept pace. ‘Take me where I can do no harm,’ Will had shouted tearfully when the Alder appeared to him in the forest, and Auberon had extended his pale hand. Will had hesitated, stolen a final look at

Hannibal's too-pale face, and with grim determination took the offered hand. It was cold, and the contact brought a brief tingle to his skin. Together they had stepped out of the Temerian wood and into the world of the Aen Elle.

Will's hair was wet with anxious sweat, and he slicked it back with icy hands. He tried not to think of Hannibal lying stock-still on the ground, or of the way his mind had been silent when Will had searched for it, prodded it for a sign he would be okay. He had been stunned as he looked at the older man's face, golden eyes shut tight against the world.

Hannibal lying at his feet, downed by Will's own hand; that was where this unwelcome power had led him, but it would not be the path on which he remained. He would not have that death on his conscience. Will would leave him, never see him again, before he would risk killing him.

Auberon had not been surprised to hear his name called so soon, and he walked a few paces ahead of Will now, feet falling lightly over white marbled floors as he led Will to the end of an expansive hallway.

"What is this place?" asked Will.

Auberon did not answer right away. He waited until they stood beneath the open archway of the hall, and then turned to face Will with a serene expression. A cool breeze ruffled his long ebony hair, sending it to stroke across ivory skin and over electrical blue eyes, the same as Will's save for the pupils, huge circles instead of sharp slits.

"Where are we?" Will ventured once more. Auberon waved a hand to the open air behind him through the stone arch.

"We're in a place where your mind will do no harm. The capital of our world. Tir na Lia."

Will squinted into the light of the cityscape, hardly seeing the world through the blurred vision of his eyes, tired and teary as they were. "My..." he began carefully, "…Hannibal. Will he -" Will's words stopped in his throat, and he could not bear to finish his question. But Auberon intuited his inquiry, and with a sharp glint of his eyes, shook his head.

"The witcher will live. You merely stunned him."

A sigh of relief escaped Will's lips, and he busied his lower lip between his teeth to cut it short. He would not seem overly thankful in front of the unfamiliar and still untrustworthy Aen Elle. But he was relieved. Oh! He was so thankful he could burst with the feeling. Hannibal lived, in another world now, but he lived. In his contemplative pause, Will caught the eyes of Auberon and looked quickly away. He tried desperately to push his thoughts of Hannibal to the corner of his mind, where the Aen Elle could not interpret them. A perfumed wisp of wind caught in Will's wild curls, drying the sweat, and he cleared his throat.

"I've never done that before," Will said, eyes still averted to focus on his boots instead of the tall, eerie elf. "Stunned anyone like that." Even as he said it, he knew it wasn't true. The djinn. Will had sent out an electric jolt of magic to entrap the djinn. But Auberon didn't need to know everything, shouldn't know everything, and so he continued. "My mind has always

lashed inward, harming only myself, never others. Until recently." Until the night of the tavern when he had set a man on fire, thrown another across the room. Stunned Hannibal. A shiver crawled up his spine at the memory.

Auberon led them through the arch, into a courtyard of white stone and vines. They lingered between a crystal fountain and the source of the perfume-sweet air, a wall of blood-red flowers Will did not recognize.

"And do you know what has caused this sudden incline of power?" Auberon asked Will, tilting his head in a manner not dissimilar to the way Hannibal would tilt his own when struck with curiosity.

Will shook his head. He did not know. Ever since he'd survived the trials, the shifts of his mind had been a mystery to him. His mind had been a mystery before he became a witcher, if he were truly being honest. "I've never known the capacity of my mind or how it works, or why," he admitted to the flowers. He saw Auberon nod his head in his peripheral. "I lived most of my life in a swamp with my..." he hesitated on the last word, and then finally looked up at the elf, to match his unnerving gaze, and finished strongly, "with my father. On the rare occasions I was in town with him, it would end with me being swiftly booted from it. People do not like it when you can feel them so clearly. Nor do they like the sight of a boy in seizure." He did not say that he would take it all back in a heartbeat. He did not say that he would rather be in pain himself than hurt others. No, not others. He did not care much for others, and if he said he did it would be a lie.

Hannibal. He would rather be in pain forever than have ever hurt Hannibal.

"You lived in relative isolation," Auberon began, his voice breaking the pregnant silence of Will's misfiring mind, "which is good, Ensh'eass. It means your foster listened to my warnings, even if it took him some time to appreciate the - extent - of your differences."

Will quirked his head, and his manic thoughts of the witcher he'd left behind were replaced with an image of a fisherman, alcohol fueled and cruel. "You know my father?" he asked. "I mean, my human father." The amendment tasted queer on his tongue.

"You are a bastard, Ensh'eass," Auberon responded without hesitation. "Do you know what that means?"

"Of course I know what it means," Will snapped. "I grew up in solitude, not ignorance." He thought through the title and frowned. "But I am not fatherless," he pointed out bitingly. "According to you, I have not one, but two fathers. I am the opposite of bastard."

Auberon motioned before them, and they resumed their walk through the courtyard. An easel stood propped by the edge of a black iron rail, blocking a steep overlook to the city below, and the Alder caressed the stretched canvas of a half-finished painting as they strolled past. Will strained to catch sight of the image, but caught only a splash of blue against a frosty white palette. Auberon must have felt the young witcher's mind wandering, because he clapped his hands together before he deigned to speak, the echoing slap of palm to palm drawing attention.

“You are a bastard, because your mother was human, and therefore could not formally acknowledge me as the father,” he explained. “In this world, being tainted with human blood is unheard of, or rather, it is unspoken of. Your mother was a beautiful woman. Human.” Auberon’s eyes grew pale and misty as if reaching to see through time. But then he blinked and the mist vanished. “Of course, when you were born there was no question of you remaining in the world of the Aen Elle. You would live in Temeria with your mother. But your mother died during child birth, and what was I to do? I am not completely heartless.”

“No?” asked Will. “You only dropped me off at the nearest shack with the drunkest man you could find, and abandoned me to a world my mind was not built to live in.” Will was tired. He was angry. His heart ached. He stared at the elf who claimed to be his blood-kin, and he felt sick.

“You were half-equipped,” Auberon corrected in a slightly defensive tone. “And I made it clear it would be in Graham's best interest to keep you safe.”

“And how did you manage that, I wonder?” Will said, straightening his shoulders to address his elven father. “You used magic on him, didn't you? To make him keep me.”

“I did. It was the only way.”

“That's great to hear. And when he tried to leave me at the orphanage...”

Auberon shrugged his shoulders, like none of their exchange weighed heavily on his shoulders, not in the slightest. “I reminded him why he should not.”

“And that's the only reason he came back for me,” Will said. “My life is suddenly making sense in the most horrific way.”

“You will do well to remember that you have had it better than most half children.”

“What is the fate of most others like me?”

“Bashed brains,” Auberon replied.

Will’s hands drew up into fists at his sides. “Ah.” It was unsurprising. He glanced over the rail, out at the world he half belonged in. “So why now?”

Auberon halted their stroll, the set expression of his face informing Will that this was the turn of conversation he had been awaiting. “Because circumstances have changed. There has been a death.”

“Oh no. That's terrible,” dripped Will in a vile mood.

“Watch your tongue, or you will lose it,” the elf responded coolly.

Will sighed and crossed his arms over his chest, to hide the fists that refused to unclench and soothe his rapidly beating heart. “Who died, and why should it matter to me?”

“Our King has died,” answered Auberon. “He was murdered, in fact. He was what we called The Great Red Dragon.” Will’s eyes grew huge. “With his death, the blood of elves has been spilt, and Ithlinne’s prophecy of the end of days has been set into motion.”

“Pardon?”

It seemed he was predisposed to over-drinking when Will was giving him trouble, and Hannibal was making his way through his third jug of spiced wine when he felt the tap on his shoulder. He sighed and looked about him, to the three guards decked in royal armor standing in a crescent at his back.

“May I help you?” Hannibal asked with horrid humor. “I must warn you, I am in no mood to fight. Fairly, at least.” He cracked a smile. If Will had been there, he would have recognized it as his tipsy smile. But Will wasn’t there, and so he grumbled angrily, “What do you want?”

One of the three guards cleared his throat nervously and spoke in a surprisingly deep tenor. “King Chilton requests your presence, master witcher. Right away, he said.”

Hannibal drained his wine and slammed the sorrowfully empty jug down on the bar. “Chilton has words for me?” he asked, lazily veiled amusement betraying his gruff tone. “I feel honored. Tell your joker king that it was with deepest regrets I had to turn down his request.”

The guard stammered, shuffled his polished boots. “We were given very strict orders, master witcher.”

“Then, in very strict response, you can tell Chilton I said to fuck off. I have no business with your little king.”

The guard gathered his nerve and puffed up his chest, and Hannibal observed his show of bravery with the mild interest only three jugs of wine can provide. “He has business with you, sir. And it cannot be delayed.”

His tipsy smile again, crooked and sly and dangerous to unsuspecting royal guards. “What will you do if I don't come with you?” Hannibal asked with genuine curiosity.

“We will be forced to use...erm...force.”

“That would be something to see,” the witcher said. He looked into the sad bottom of his empty drink. He did not wish to exchange snarls with King Chilton. He wished to drink more and stagger through the countryside snuffing out his apprentice.

However.

The king could provide a way of seeking him out sooner than a witcher’s tracking skills alone. A favor for a favor? Aide finding Will in exchange for whatever Chilton wanted?

Hannibal grumbled and stood from his chair, awash in drink but unwavering and forever solid. “Take me to him, then. I would not want you to overexert yourselves in vie for my

capture.”

Hannibal had been around enough years to have made acquaintance with several world leaders at one time or another. Rulers were in need of witchers as much as the next farmer or tavern owner. So it was that Hannibal knew most of the Northern Realm’s kings and queens. So it was that he knew Frederick Chilton, Nilfgaardian King, pain in Temeria’s collective arse. It was why Hannibal was wary as the guards led him and Winston through the countryside, passing through White Orchard and straight for Vizima.

He allowed the anticipated annoyance to fill him, to drown the sting of absence residing in his bones. Will might be missing, but he was not un-trackable, and when he was found, Hannibal would make him pay dearly for his trouble. Hannibal vanquished the satisfying image of a proper spanking from his mind and returned his concentration to preparing to see Chilton again without immediately killing him.

The last time they had met had been before the war, before Nilfgaardians had conquered the north. Chilton had requested Hannibal’s help, and with the promise of great sums of money, Hannibal had met with him. The ‘help’ Chilton had in mind had been in the form of an assassination, a regicide, specifically, and Hannibal had refused involvement. Witchers, he maintained stoutly, were neutral in such matters of the human world, and apolitical. He had paid no mind to sparing insults when his refusal had been made. Chilton was, after all, intolerable. The king had continued with his plan without Hannibal’s help, and it was not long until the Nilfgaardians had trampled through the whole of the Northern Realm. He had heard nothing more from Chilton, though he heard of him often, in furious whispers of hatred, the name hissed like a curse.

He did not savor the idea of meeting with the caricature king again. But he had means beyond Hannibal’s means. And money. Hannibal could control his urge to throttle and stab, at least for a while, at least until he learned whether or not Chilton would help him find Will.

It took a day’s hard ride to arrive at the palace in Vizima, where Hannibal was greeted with leers by the court nobles and led straight through the entrance hall into a fancily tiled washroom.

“You will bathe before you are brought before King Chilton,” the mustached man announced as he held open the door for the palace guest.

“Is that necessary?” Hannibal questioned his finely suited escort and was met with a haughty snivel. “King Chilton wishes you deloused before you enter his chambers, witcher.”

Hannibal's eyes narrowed. So that was the game they were playing. “I am not lousy,” he said. “But I will help myself to a bath all the same, for my own sake, if not for his Majesty's.”

The escort nodded his skinny approval and left the washroom, locking the ornate door soundly behind him. Hannibal laughed softly. Like a little lock on a little door would keep

him if he truly desired to leave. He stripped his leathers from his body and sank into the tub of hot water provided that had apparently been waiting for him.

Hannibal thought of blue eyes and tousled curls as his hands skimmed the steamy, soapy bathwater. He had grown so used to bathing in the lakes and streams with Will. Innocent moments, before any exchanges of desire had been admitted. He remembered the way Will would comb through Hannibal's wet hair after he'd dressed him, and pull it back in a tie. How his fingers would linger at the nape of his neck, only for a moment, before the blush pulled his hand away.

How Hannibal longed for the next day and the next stream, to bring his fingers near his skin once more.

Now, his own fingers trailed across his flesh. Soon, Hannibal fancied, they would connect with the apprentice's backside. That brought a reluctant grin to the witcher's face. It was easier to think of punishment for Will's absence than to think of Will's absence.

Strange to him, that there was a time when Hannibal was always alone. He had liked it, treasured the solitude. He tried to treasure it now, in the tub, but to no avail. His body wanted only for Will, responded only to Will. After a speedy, passionless scrub, he lifted himself from the tub, water still mostly clean (he really had not required a bath), and dried himself with a soft towel.

"Your beard, witcher," complained the escort when Hannibal opened the door dressed only in his towel.

Hannibal pouted and brought a hand to his scruff. Will liked his beard, but no matter. He would shave it smooth, and before the beard returned in full, Hannibal would make sure he was returned to Will. "Direct me to a sink with a looking glass. And razor."

Minutes later, Hannibal stood in the washroom, in front of a pristinely spotless mirror and looked at himself.

He could see it in his eyes, and wondered if anyone else could. The void. The lacking. Dark curls and blue eyes should have been in his eyes' reflection, not the sharp featured man with the pained face.

He brought practiced fingers to his throat, wrapped around a blade as sharp as his cheekbones, and scraped clean the thick silvering beard. He smoothed his own hair back from his brow and guided his strands into a plait down his neck.

There. Chilton could have no room for complaint at his appearance. If anything, he would be at a loss for words. He had struggled before to remain aloof to Hannibal's almost otherworldly beauty.

Otherworldly beauty. Will.

Hannibal kept the boy's face in his mind as he emerged from the washroom, fully dressed, groomed, and irritable. "Take me to Chilton," Hannibal said to his attending escort.

An awkward nod, and they were off.

"You have not heard of Ithlinne's prophecy?" Auberon asked the wide-eyed young witcher in front of him.

"Do I look like I've heard of it?" Will shot back. He was unnerved by news of the dragon. He had killed him, not even a month ago. Snapped his neck with an impossible surge of strength in his efforts to rescue Hannibal from the Wild Hunt's fortress. With a shock, Will remembered what the dragon had told him. How they were alike. How the dragon had felt him across worlds. "The Great Red Dragon was Aen Elle?" Will asked, feigning disinterest. Did Auberon know Will was responsible for the death of his king?

"He was the Alder King, yes," replied Auberon. "But with his death, the rule has been passed to another."

Will had a bad feeling about where this was headed, but he asked anyway. "And who is the new king?"

Confirming his suspicion, Auberon smiled and said, "I am the new king."

Will could not speak. And that was probably for the best.

"And because you are my only child, my sole heir," Auberon was saying, his voice echoing to Will as if from a great distance, "your bastard status has been revoked, and you have been granted reinstatement to our society." A pale hand touched Will's shoulder, and it took every ounce of strength in his body not to gawk. "You are a prince now, Ensh'eass, and future king of the Aen Elle."

"Hannibal. I half thought they would need to drag you back here in chains," Chilton said, rounding his desk to greet the witcher with a halfhearted handshake. "Hoped, maybe, is the more accurate word in this case."

"Hello, Chilton," said Hannibal, not bowing, not addressing him with his formal title. He smiled and stood before the king with a straight back and formidable aura. It did not go unnoticed by the Nilfgaardian king.

"Well, against all odds, here you are before me," Chilton began.

"Now that you have me where you want me, what next?" Hannibal asked. He would force this meeting to expediency. It was clear from the ruffled expression on Chilton's face that he wished the meeting to be over and done with as much as Hannibal. Curious. "How can I be of service?" Hannibal prodded with a raised eyebrow.

Chilton looked him over wryly. "Oh, you are exactly how I remember you, Hannibal."

"I am quite different, I assure you," the witcher replied.

“I hope, there’s that word again, that your differences lie in your attitudes toward the world in which you live,” Chilton said in his luxuriant drawl. “Because I have sought your service in the handling of a serious matter. Very serious, indeed.”

Hannibal tilted his head, losing the obedience of a single lock of silver-blonde hair as it swept over his brow. He ignored it, and narrowed his eyes at the king. “A serious matter of the world in which we live, Chilton? By all means, tell me how I might assist you in these dire times.”

Chilton leaned forward, in confidence. “Have you heard of Ithlinne’s prophecy?”

“I’m a prince?” Will asked when his throat had opened enough to breathe again.

Auberon squeezed Will’s shoulder in what might have been interpreted as fondness, but was actually a semblance of control. “Not only are you a prince, Ensh’eass. You are the child of prophecy.”

“'The world will die amidst frost and be reborn with the new sun. It will be reborn of Elder Blood, of Hen Ichaer, of the seed that has been sown. A seed which will not sprout but burst into flame.'”

“Pretty,” Hannibal said, and Chilton snorted.

“Pretty and imminent. You are aware of the Wild Hunt, yes?” Chilton asked. “I know you are, and I know you were captured by their leader. And I know your boy murdered that leader.”

“Why ask so many questions you already know the answers to, Chilton?” Hannibal asked.

“Your boy spilt elven blood in this world, and in doing so, has spurred its destruction.”

“What do you mean? The child of prophecy?” Will asked, bewildered. A prince, a prophecy? Will had exchanged the madness of one world for another.

“'Verily I say unto you, the era of the sword and axe is nigh, the era of the wolf's blizzard. The Time of the White Chill and the White Light is nigh, the Time of Madness and the Time of Contempt: Tedd Deireádh, the Time of End.'”

“That doesn’t sound…good?” Will offered, beyond confused.

Auberon placed his other hand on Will’s shoulder to hold him squarely in his grasp. “You are the Aen Elle blood sown, Ensh’eass. The prophecy has been activated, thus activating the power within your veins. A seed that will not sprout but burst into flame.”

“I’m the seed?” Will asked in a small voice.

“The Time of the White Chill, Hannibal. You’ve heard of it. We’ve all heard of it, and your apprentice,” Chilton said as he paced the room in front of his desk, “is not only the one who started it, he’s the one who will finish it.”

“Why am I here, Chilton?” Hannibal asked the unsettled king.

“I need you to find Will Graham, fisherman’s son, witcher, child of prophecy, and finish him before he can finish all of us.”

Hannibal’s mouth was a thin, tense line.

“You are the seed, Ensh’eass. It is why your powers have grown out of your control,” Auberon said with a tumultuous shine in his eyes. “You must join your people, and help us. Use the gifts bestowed to you to guide the Aen Elle.”

“You must find him and kill him, Hannibal,” Chilton said. “Before he destroys our world.”

Will’s mind flew in a multitude of directions, but at its center, it steadied on Hannibal’s face, lying motionless on the forest floor. He blinked at the elf, his father, the king, helpless. “My power can help the Aen Elle?” he asked.

Auberon smiled at him and nodded. Their electric blue eyes fastened. “Yes. Will you help us?”

Hannibal thought of bright blue eyes and the elven blood running hot through his beloved’s veins. Chilton eyed the witcher impatiently.

“I will find Will,” Hannibal told the expectant king.

“And you will kill him?” Chilton asked. A purse stuffed with crowns weighed heavy in his extended palm.

“I will.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Hey, everyone! This chapter is a bit shorter than the others, but I wanted to post it anyway, because I have the patience of a five year old, and I hate leaving our boys in the lurch.
>
> This story is silly madness. Thank you to everyone still reading! All of your wonderful comments have been filed away into my memory box of encouragement to keep always. Love!

The water was pink from the stain of the garden flowers, and the blood-red petals floated dreamily across the milky surface. The tub resembled a bright copper, though Will was unsure whether it was a true copper or some foreign, elven, magical tub metal. It was all a mystery to him, all a question.

The bath water was heavy with the perfume of the flowers, and Will found, after inhaling several deep breaths, that the aroma had a calming effect. He sank against the back of the tub and stretched his legs, stretched them as far as they would stretch, and his toes only skimmed the other side, for the bath was enormous, larger than any tub Will had ever seen. Not that he'd seen many tubs in his life. As soon as he sat back, he felt hands tangling in his hair.

"Wha-" he began with a fussy noise of protest, but the hands persisted. In fact, more hands persisted, and Will noticed, with a surprised glance about the tub, that he was surrounded by Aen Elle maidens. And they were scrubbing at him with sweet smelling sugars and soap puffs. The fingers in his hair worked a pink lather through Will's curls, and he struggled on a precarious fence between pleasure and horror. "What," Will tried again, pleased with himself for finishing a word with so many hands getting familiar with him, "is going on here?" A full sentence. Excellent. The fingers tugged gently in his hair and he groaned. A small groan, but a groan all the same and his face flushed as pink as the bathwater.

The maidens did not respond, merely continued to lather and caress and repeat, and Will tried again for a verbal touchdown. "I appreciate the help, but I can wash myself," he said, not unkindly. The only response was the splish-splash of the water as elven hands busied themselves with the task of a thorough washing. "Really," he said desperately, when a hand rubbed over a particular, hands-off area. "No need, no need!"

A laugh at the doorway of the bathing chamber mingled in the air with the sound of Will's yelp. Will looked up through a fallen strand of soapy, snow-white hair, at the figure mocking his helplessness with laughter. "Is this necessary?" he asked the tall elf in the cloak, swatting at the seeking hands.

Auberon leaned against the door, and Will found the physicality unsettlingly casual for the elf who was the king, his father. Did kings lean in doorways? Or at all? Did they laugh at their son's bath time molestations? An aggressive hand reached under the bend in his knee and soaped him mercilessly. Will did, in fact, squeak when this happened, and shot a dirty look at the figure in the doorway.

"That is enough," Auberon said, finally, and the maidens abruptly unhanded Will's various bits, stood up from their kneeling positions around the tub, and streamed from the bathing chamber in an erotic single file line.

"Thank you," Will sighed even though most of the damage had already been done. He was extremely clean and…thoroughly scrubbed. His father watched him with curious amusement, and Will thought for the first time how un-human he looked.

"Next time I can send males for your bath," Auberon offered. "I did not think of it, Ensh'eass."

"No," Will said, surely as red as the flower petals at that point. "I am quite happy to bathe myself." He thought of Hannibal, then, naturally, and sighed. "I would like to speak to you about returning home."

That drew a lifted brow from the Aen Elle, but when he responded, it was as though Will's words had gone unheard. "We will dine together now." He waved his hand toward the doorway, and stared expectantly at the prince in the tub.

"Alright," Will said, terribly hungry. They would dine, and Will would repeat his question then. He looked around the tub for a towel, finding nothing but scattered flower petals. "I just need to dry off and get dressed," he hinted heavily to Auberon, who made no move to fetch him anything at all.

"Let us go, then," was all the king said, and then he turned and left the chamber.

Will sat alone in the tub. "Hmm." He made a decision and stood up from the bath sans towel, and as soon as his body left the water, it was dry. As if by magic. He hummed softly, curiously, to himself and stepped fully from the tub. His feet were dry before they touched the stone floor. Will brought a hand up to his hair where his curls had dried wild on his head, and the single streak of witcher-white hanged stubbornly over his eyes, but he let it hang. It reminded him.

He stood naked in the bathing chamber, and wondered idly if clothes would magically appear if he left the room. With no other options, he gave it a shot.

He stood naked in the hall, no magical clothes to hide beneath when he realized the hall was full of Aen Elle. And they were all looking at Will, their naked, blushing prince. Before Will could retreat back into the adjacent chamber, Auberon's voice summoned him from across the hall.

"Ensh'eass, come."

He came, one hurried step at a time, down an aisle between two long dining tables packed with watchful elves. His feet, which were also probably blushing, led him hastily to the opposite side of the hall, where Auberon was standing with two raised goblets. Will reached him, accepted the goblet, and murmured under his breath, “Can I have some clothes, please? Do you think?” Auberon shook his head, ‘no’, and clinked his goblet against Will’s.

“Our prince!” Auberon said in a sudden and booming address toward the elves. “Our child of prophecy! Ensh’eass!”

In a unified voice that vibrated through Will’s entire body, the elves repeated the words, “OUR PRINCE! OUR CHILD OF PROPHECY! ENSH’EASS!”

Will, terribly naked, tried to appear regal, but the goblet he lifted was shaking in his hands, and he had to gulp it down to keep it from sloshing all over. He did not want to sticky himself and risk another bath. When he felt the hand on his shoulder leading him to sit down, he was beyond relieved. Auberon gestured to a maiden standing alert at his side, and she refilled Will’s goblet with more drink. He motioned to a second helper, this one with a shimmery cloth in his hands, and Will found himself draped in a velveteen robe, wine red. Will smiled gratefully at the elven helper and clutched the robe about himself, slipping his arms into the sleeves. It was a far cry from the leathers he had grown used to, but Will would have been happy to wear a jester suit at that point.

At his covering, the hall of elves seemed to lose their interest, and a soft wave of conversation began to fill the room. Auberon waited until that time to turn to Will. “It is a tradition, to present oneself to one’s people.”

Will nodded, and thought of how much he hated traditions. “I hope I satisfied,” he said briskly.

“You are the child of prophecy,” Auberon said. “You are the epitome of satisfactory.”

“About that,” Will said after a sip of his drink. It was not quite wine, but it was similar, and it tasted tart on Will’s tongue. “I had a lot of time to think, in my bath.” Auberon nodded, and Will bit his lip, released it. “You said that Hannibal,” his voice nearly broke on the name, “was stunned, but that he would be okay.” He tried to gauge the expression on the king’s face, but it was blank. “I would like to return now, and see him, to explain to him why I – why I can’t stay with him.”

Auberon’s face remained blank. “No.”

“No?” Will asked.

“You cannot return to him,” Auberon clarified evenly. “You cannot leave.”

Will’s heart hammered in his chest with a rising panic. “I’m sorry, did I misunderstand you?”

“I said no. You are the prince, and you are the child of prophecy, and you will not leave,” Auberon affirmed. He drank from his goblet, mindless of the wide eyed bundle of nerves beside him.

“I came here by choice,” Will said, loathing the trembling of his speech. “I want to learn to control my power, and I’d like to help your people-”

“Our people,” Auberon interjected.

“Our people,” Will modified. “I would like to help them. But I would also like to return to my world and see Hannibal. He is…I would like to see him.”

“No.”

“Auberon!” Will shouted, his voice ringing loud in the hall. “Have I come here to be a prisoner?”

The Aen Elle king’s voice was low and melodic when he answered, and Will felt a cold hand grip his wrist beneath the table, tight. “If I recall, you came here because you were a force of destruction in your world. The last time you saw your witcher, he was unconscious by your hands. You are the prince, and you will remain here until I tell you otherwise, and you will never see the witcher again.”

Will gasped and snatched his wrist from Auberon’s clutching fist. “You can’t keep me.” He rose from the table, and the soft cloth of the robe swished around his ankles. Auberon waved his hands and Will was grabbed from behind by strong arms. “Hey!” Will yelled, struggling in the grip, but it held him like iron, and there was no escape. He was trapped, yet again, and rendered helpless as the elven guard dragged him through the hall, and into a small, dark room. Helpless as he was thrown to the ground. Helpless as the door bolted shut. Helpless like so many times before, only this time, he was in another world, where there was no Hannibal to save him.

Hannibal knocked on the door. He didn’t want to, but he did it.

Knock, knock, knock.

He waited. When the door creaked open, he held himself back from the eye roll he desired, and instead presented the door-opener with his most amiable smile.

“Hello, Freddie,” he said.

The red haired sorceress looked him up and down with big eyes. “This is unexpected,” she said slowly. “And unwanted.”

“The feeling is mutual, I assure you,” Hannibal replied. “Now be a dear and invite me in.”

She scoffed bitterly and jutted out a hip, ginger spirals bouncing about her head as she shook it. “'Awful to see you, let me in?'” she asked, affronted. “Why would I let you in? Out of the goodness of my heart?”

“We both know you are heartless, Freddie. Let me in out of self preservation only,” he said.

She seethed. “What’s in it for me?”

“I will let you keep your hide. Maybe. Let me in.”

“I don’t think I will,” Freddie said with a scheming smirk.

“Let him in, Freddie,” came a voice. The door was pulled open fully, and Hannibal smiled at Alana.

“Hannibal,” she said with a nod of her head, her dark waves falling gracefully around her shoulders. “Where’s Will?” she asked, puzzlement knitting her brows together.

“Hello, Alana,” Hannibal said. “And already I receive the answer to my first question, which was to be ‘Have you seen Will?’”

Alana frowned. “I haven’t seen Will since I saw you, in Novigrad. Has something happened since then?”

Margot appeared at Alana’s side, with a scathing look for Hannibal. “What’s happened now?”

Alana turned to her and whispered, “He’s looking for Will.”

“Will’s missing? Again?” she asked, voice raspy and indignant. “Are the two of you incapable of not being ridiculous? Do you need to be chained together so the other doesn’t get lost?”

Hannibal allowed himself a smile at the thought. “I am not averse to the idea of chains.”

Freddie, still blocking the door with her petite body, grimaced. “Hannibal, tell us why you’re really here, or I’m closing the door. I don’t care what you say, Alana,” she said over her shoulder at the brunette’s huff of dissent.

The witcher narrowed his golden eyes at the ginger sorceress. “Ithlinne’s prophecy.”

Freddie’s grimace morphed into a thin line of distress, and when Alana pushed her aside, she did not fight it. Hannibal walked through the door, into the Lodge of Sorceresses.

Tension eased with a glass of whiskey in hand, and the gathering was well-equipped with the amber liquid as they sat in a circle, perched on seats of tree stumps. Hannibal sat in the center of the sorceresses, and told his tale of the last few days: Will’s power, the cloaked figure, Chilton, and the prophecy. When he was done, shocked eyes were fixed upon his face, and he grunted.

“So Chilton was right?” Hannibal asked.

A blonde sorceress answered in a thoughtful cadence, lips pursed and body motionless, a talking ice sculpture. “Ithlinne’s prophecy is known to the Lodge,” Bedelia said. “And it

sounds as though Will might be capable of its fulfillment. From my brief encounter with him, I can attest to his potential."

Hannibal's chin lifted incrementally of its own volition, in pride of his apprentice's praise. "He is a treasure house of potential, Bedelia," he agreed. "But I fear he has been foolhardy in his attempt to flee from me."

Freddie laughed. "Foolhardy to flee from you? Sounds to me that was exactly the right move."

It was Margot who spoke next, surprising everyone, Hannibal included, when she said, "Shut up Freddie. Will loves Hannibal. He wouldn't just run away after all they've been through to be together."

Hannibal's eyebrows rose at the declaration. Did Will love him? He had never asked, and had never been told. And was Margot to be the champion of their unspoken love, of all people? He smiled at her, genuine. "I believe he fled to avoid hurting me."

Alana nodded her agreement, and Hannibal saw her squeeze Margot's hand affectionately. "I believe Will would risk your ire before he risked your life," she said.

"Can you perform a spell? Can you sense where he is?" Hannibal asked.

Alana paused, thinking. "Hannibal," she said with careful consideration, "if Will has called out to his father, he's unreachable now."

Hannibal blinked. "Will is never unreachable, Alana."

"He is if he's not in this world anymore," she said. "I'm sorry, Hannibal. There's no way of finding him if he's nowhere in this realm to be found."

"I have to find him," Hannibal said. He ignored the pitying looks of the sorceresses. "I will find him."

Will huddled in the corner of the dark room. His witcher eyes allowed him vision through the blackness, but there was nothing to be seen. The room was empty, save for the young prince holding his knees to his chest.

He felt like a fool. No, he was a fool, the most foolish human, elf, prince, witcher in this world and the next, to have let his emotions betray his better judgment. A fool, an unforgivable fool, to have left Hannibal and called for the Alder to take him away. What problem could Will have had that Hannibal himself would not try to fix? Hadn't Hannibal striven to fix all of his other problems? Sad in a swamp? Hannibal fixed it. Mind out of control? Hannibal fixed it. Gaping stomach wound? Hannibal fixed it.

He had cared for him, endlessly, enthusiastically, earnestly, and Will had left him in a moment of weakness.

Foolish.

He shut his foolish eyes and slammed his stupid head back against the stone wall. He yelled, and it echoed in the tiny room, bouncing back to assault his ears. He laughed and thought of Dimmond, dead Dimmond with his poetry and his blood as it gushed from his throat. Dimmond had called him a prince. Dimmond would be laughing if he wasn't so dead.

Hannibal would kill him for this, Will thought, coaxing another mad cackle from his lips. It was funny, because Will would never see Hannibal ever again. He laughed and laughed. It was so, so, hideously funny that it brought tears to his eyes, and Will slammed his head back against the stone wall again, again, again. He cried out from the pain and the hilarity. Bashed brains, Auberon had said. Would the king think it amusing to find the child of prophecy like every other elven bastard, brains bashed against the stone?

His head slammed back again, and he screamed. A jolt of electricity shot through his scalp, down his neck, over his stomach. He slammed his fists into the ground, and his palms thrummed powerfully, steadily, with that eerie pulse, like a heartbeat.

Boom, boom, boom, BOOM.

When his fists pummeled the floor so hard a scream ripped from his throat, a burst of light spread through the room, and a bright blue doorway unzipped in front of Will.

Blood dripped down his neck, and when he tried to stand, he surged forward, dizzy, and tumbled headfirst through the accidental portal.

It snapped shut behind him, and the tiny room was empty once more.

Alana's head snapped up from her glass of whiskey, and her eyes darted to Bedelia's, then Freddie's. Then Hannibal's.

"What is it?" Hannibal asked her.

She stood and practically ran to the witcher, grasping both hands on his shoulders. "I feel him."

"Will?" he asked, taken aback by her sudden shift and gleaming eyes.

"I think," she said.

"You think? You don't know?" Hannibal asked, frustrated and too worried to hide it.

"A powerful surge of magic," Alana said. Behind her, Bedelia and Freddie were nodding, frowning. "It might be Will. He's the only one I know with such a powerful signature."

Hannibal stood, and grasped Alana's shoulders in turn. "Where is he?"

She squeezed her lids shut in concentration for a moment, two moments, then opened them. They glistened with apprehension. “Velen,” she said. “Crookback Bog.”

Will lifted his head from the puddle of mud he had landed in. His first thought was of his elven bath, and how he preferred dirty hair to grasping hands. His second thought was spoken aloud. “OH, my head!”

He pushed himself up on his hands and knees, and then brought a tentative finger to feel along his busted scalp. His finger came away bloody, like he knew it would, and he threw up.

Stomach empty, head pounding, Will turned to look behind him, where the portal had been and no longer was. Then he looked up and around. The air smelled familiar. The soft ground beneath his hands felt familiar, as well. With a moan, he sat up on his knees to better survey his location, but the motion only dizzied him further, and the swamp swayed sickeningly, back and forth. He managed to fall backwards when he fainted, avoiding his vomit. But he did faint. And when he did, three shadows stirred from their hiding places amongst the trees, and made their way for the unconscious boy.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> Hi, awesome folks who have read up to this point. I appreciate all of your wonderful, sweet comments! You are precious cupcakes, each and every one of you. I hope you enjoy this next chapter. Apparently Will's a biter. ;)

“Ooooh. That’ll make a pretty meal.”

“You can have that. I want those eyes for myself. I want to hold them between my fingers and take a bite.”

“They’re big enough for two bites.”

“The Alder won’t mind if we take the eyes. Or this strip of skin.”

“Noooo. Noooo, he won’t mind, as long as we leave him enough.”

“As long as we leave him whole. Does this count as part of the whole?”

Will woke to the jabbing of jagged nails in his flesh and sour breath dampening his wrist. He kept his heart steady, calm, a sleeping man’s repose, and willed his body to inertia when the twinge of pointed teeth scraped across his skin. As outwardly placid as he was, inside Will’s mind was a storm as he thought furiously. Where was he, and where had he been? He had gone to Tir na Lia, he had quarreled with Auberon, he had fallen through a portal, and now he was lying down in some foul smelling place being poked and groped by –

“Depends on who you ask. Some would find him perfectly whole without it.”

“Hmmmm…”

“Maybe just a taste.”

“He can’t get mad over a taste.”

Crones. The Crones of Crookback Bog. Will remembered his vision doubling and falling into darkness, but before that he had seen the trees of his childhood and had smelled the thick air of his previous life, felt the soggy earth at his back. The portal had taken him straight into the heart of Velen’s swamps. Were he to open his eyes, he would see three legends of horror cowering over him, hideous and grotesque, so, for the moment, he decided it best to feign unconsciousness. He resigned to listen to the crones as they discussed which parts of him would pair best with Blood of Virgin. He wondered if it was from him they planned to drink, and cursed inwardly at Hannibal for leaving his blood a palatable option. Then a sharp nail

dug into his groin and he cursed outwardly and loudly, very loudly. Loud enough to surprise the crones for a fraction of a second, which was long enough time for Will to roll free from the nails. He rolled right off a table, in fact, and slammed his head against a cold, hard surface.

Eyes open and fluttering, he realized he was in a cave. It was the cave floor, then, that had connected with his head in a sickening thud and sent Will keeling to his side and gagging. His skull still ached from his self inflicted bashing from before, and the repeat injury felt like needles stabbing his eyeballs from the inside. The crones cooed in a closing circle, surrounding him like crows upon the dead.

“He’s awake!”

“He smells delicious. I want to taste.”

“Hello, dear, do not be afraid. We will leave you whole.”

“Mostly whole.”

They reached for him, and he was wrenched from the ground with hands like claws, more beast than woman.

More monster than human.

And then he realized that they had not yet extended their fleshy arms to grab him, and that he had seen it happen before it came to pass, and when a dirty, crooked nail did try to hook into his shoulder, he turned his head, open mouthed, and clamped his jaw in a full-force bite. He felt the crunch of bones.

The crone shrieked and shook him off, staggering away. In Will’s mind, he saw the second crone reaching, pink-stained teeth bared and glinting with hungry saliva, and so he was ready for her and rolled away, rolled to his feet. He nearly fell back over, head-sick as he was, but managed to steady himself for the third crone that thought of slitting his throat with her nails, but suffered a blow to her own throat instead with a cat-quick punch that Will landed with surprising ease, considering his state. His witcher speed was to thank, he knew. And his Alder blood. And his training with Hannibal.

Hannibal, he thought, and he smiled as the crones descended, too slow for his precognitive mind. He spun, kicked, jumped past one, cut into another with a rock picked up from the cave floor. If he was in Crookback Bog with the crones, he was in Temeria, in Hannibal’s world. They shared the same dimension once more, and Will’s smile flashed like a lightning strike in the dark cave as he spun from the grip of one crone, another, and then fled from their villainous circle.

“You cannot run far, pretty prince,” they called after him.

“Not until we have a bite.”

“Only a bite. Only a morsel.”

His naked feet slapped against the cool stone, and he knew they were behind him, knew they grabbed for his ankles as he reached the far wall and found a rope of vine and began to climb. They were faster than he thought they would be, but he was faster than they thought he would be, and their grasping hands came away with only air as he ascended the cave wall. Up, up, he climbed, with throbbing temples and ripping skin as the thorny vines scraped scarlet lines into his palms and shredded the padding of his fingers. They will have their virgin blood after all, thought Will in a morbid humor.

“He escapes us!”

“Get him, get him!”

“Priiiiiince! Do not fall from so high up!”

“You’ll break your back, end up in our sup’!”

Higher, higher he climbed, until he saw the streak of light above. The mouth of the cave, he was near. Still the crones beckoned him from below.

“He is almost away!”

“Bring him back, to spread on his back!”

“Be careful of the vines you climb!”

“At times, I find, they slip with slime!”

Will was close, he was so close. The daylight lit his face, and then lit the vine he clung to, only it was no longer a vine, but a snake in his hands. His fingers squeezed helplessly around it as it writhed, but its skin was slick and oozing, and Will could not hold on. The snake snapped its back like a whip, and with an angry cry, Will was tossed from his hold, and he fell back through the air, spiraling down into the crones’ cave. If the impact didn’t kill him, they would. He screamed, and a spark coursed through his body, and at the moment before his back was to break against the ground, a door in the floor blazed blue and bright, and Will fell through the portal.

He was still in the swamps, but he was far from Crookback Bog, and Will watched from his back as the portal shut from where it hovered in the air above him. It was him, then. Will was the one who had opened the portal in Tir na Lia. He shook his head to un-stick the damp curls from his forehead. Perhaps it was silly to be so shocked at the development. His life had been a series of impossible developments ever since he was dragged from his father’s shack. Not Auberon, his father the king (Will could not think of that elf as his father, especially now with the taste of betrayal so fresh in his mouth). His real father, the fisherman. And it was that father’s shack he saw now with blue eyes glowing, in the space ahead, between the wilting trees.

It looked unchanged, uncared for, unkempt, moss crawling up every rotting plank of swamp wood.

Will stood, swaying. He was dressed in the robe the Aen Elle had given him, and he hugged it tight to fight the chill from his skin. The urge to call out for his father came and went, but he took a step toward the shack all the same. Took another step, feet silent on soft, marshy grass, bloody hand lifted and reaching, for what, he did not know. Another step.

And then the smell.

It encased him, singed the roots of his mind's wall, but he continued his steps forward until he stood at the door of the place that had once been his home. Hanging off its hinges, the broken door creaked with the rhythm of the wind, and Will could see him inside. He was sprawled at the center of the threadbare carpet. His jaw was slack.

That was the only detail Will allowed himself see before he turned away, hand over his mouth to dispel the bile rising quick in his throat. He shut his eyes and sank to his knees. He sat outside the shack until he felt the ripple in the air and the sound of a portal popping into existence.

Will was to his feet in a second, tired body held up only by adrenaline. He had expected Auberon would find him swiftly.

And he might still. But the portal before him was not Auberon's portal. It was Alana's. And after she stepped through it, Hannibal followed.

"Hannibal!" Will yelled, and he threw himself forward, launching his body into the extended arms of the witcher. Hannibal held him fiercely to his chest, and he was warm and smelled like Hannibal, and Will buried his face into his neck and gasped his name, again and again.

Will could hear Alana's voice over his own panting breath, but did not care enough to listen to the words. He let Hannibal scoop him up in his arms, and when they stepped back through the portal, he grasped Hannibal's silver braid and pulled his head down to kiss him.

Will was practically in Hannibal's lap as they sat in the council's circle with the Lodge of Sorceresses. Their fingers were entwined and pressed to Hannibal's chest. Will's aching head nuzzled shamelessly against the older man's shoulder. He didn't even mind the rough leather armor that chafed his cheek. Hannibal's hand that was not married to Will's was kept firmly around the boy's waist, ensuring his nearness. In truth, they had not stopped touching one another since their embrace in the swamp.

And Hannibal had no intention to ever stop.

He turned his head and pressed his nose into the wild russet locks and breathed deeply.

"Can you smell each other later?" Freddie asked, her voice abrasive, noxious to the witcher's ears.

Hannibal lifted his head reluctantly from its burrow in Will's hair, and cut her with a vicious glare. To her credit, she did not appear frightened, as most would at the end of that look, only irritated. She shifted on her tree stump seat and flipped a bushel of ginger hair over her bony shoulder.

Alana, always seeking to soothe, spoke before the tension in the room could coil tighter. "Will, we're so glad you're okay, and unharmed." She licked her lips and her eyes fell to his bloody hands. Hannibal's hands were stained in blood now, too. "Relatively unharmed, I mean," she said with a soft smile.

Will looked up at her through thick lashes, resistant to lifting his head from Hannibal's shoulder, partly because he was too dizzy, but mainly because he would not bear the separation. Never again, he told himself. Never again would they separate.

Alana and the other sorceresses were staring at him as one would stare at a unicorn. Awe-stricken, enchanted, yes. But wary and frightened, as well. Unicorns were as deadly as they were beautiful. Will was opening portals. Will was the Child of Prophecy. His very presence was a threat. His free hand twisted at his single strip of ashen hair, then fell to rest on Hannibal's knee.

"He hasn't told us how he got away yet," Freddie said. "He runs off to another world, and then suddenly reappears? Is no one else a bit suspicious? It could be a trap."

Beside him, Will felt Hannibal tensing. When he spoke, his voice thrummed pleasantly in his chest, and Will closed his eyes to the welcome vibration against his cheek. "He is back, and that's all that need concern you," the witcher rumbled. His hand tightened around Will's waist.

"It's okay, Hannibal," Will said. His own voice grated in his head, and with great effort he lifted it from the witcher's shoulder to address the sorceresses. "I escaped through a portal," he told them. "A portal of my creation, it would seem." All were silent. The only sound was Hannibal's breath against his neck. So he continued. "I don't know how I did it, but I conjured two portals. One in a cell in Tir na Lia, and another in the cave of the crones in Crookback Bog."

"That's not entirely true though, is it?" Bedelia asked calmly from her perch on the tree stump. She sat as though it were a throne, throwing ice at Will and Hannibal with her frost-blue eyes. "You know how you opened the portals, Will." He tilted his head, unsure of her meaning. "Your power of prophecy has come to fruition."

Will shook his head, and pain shot down his spine, making him grimace when he answered her. "I did not open the portals on purpose. It happened out of my control."

"And when you rendered Hannibal unconscious, was that out of your control, as well?" Freddie asked.

Hannibal felt Will stiffen in his arms, and lifted his hand to his mouth, kissing a blood-stained finger. Then he spat venom at Freddie. "You will watch your tongue, Lounds, or find yourself without it. Will is the Child of Prophecy, but he is returned to us now, and he is, despite

Alana's painstaking assessment, harmed enough to need my attention. I think we have lingered here too long already."

The sorceresses disagreed.

"I appreciate your concern for Will," Alana said. "I'm concerned, as well. But we cannot ignore what's happening, Hannibal."

Will furrowed his brow at the brunette. Beside her, Margot was rubbing circles on her back. "What do you mean, Alana?" he asked, refraining from his snide remark about her addressing him as though he were not in the room.

"The prophecy is well known to us, Will. Did Auberon tell you about it?"

He nodded. "I have come into my powers to help-" he almost said 'his people' but stopped himself. "To help the Aen Elle."

"That's all he told you?"

"We did not talk overly much. I spent most of my trip bathing and being held prisoner," mused Will.

"So it was much like every other day," Hannibal whispered at his ear, and Will laughed softly.

Bedelia scowled from across the circle. "This is no laughing matter. Your father told you half truths."

"He's not my father," Will nearly shouted, and the smile brought on by Hannibal was erased from his lips. His father was dead, probably drunk to death in a shack in the swamp. Will wondered sickly how it was his body had not yet been consumed by the lurking creatures that dwelled in the water.

"You are blood kin," Bedelia said. "Your blood is of the prophecy. Do you even know what that means?"

"I'm about to hear it, I think," Will snapped.

"You will bring about the end of days. That is why Auberon retrieved you. That is why he wanted you. To use your power for the Aen Elle. To destroy our world and increase their own power."

Will stared, unseeing. His stomach flipped and he worried he might sick up in the middle of the sorceresses' circle. Auberon wanted him for his own means. It was logical. It was what he himself had already deduced. But hearing it from another…it was different. More painful. One father was decomposing. Another was power hungry. Neither had loved him. Neither had wanted him.

Will shook his head. "It's not right, the prophecy. You've confused it somehow."

“I don't think so,” Bedelia argued.

Will squeezed Hannibal's hand and his eyes watered from the pressure against his cuts. He ached. He ached all over.

Hannibal stood up suddenly, pulling Will to stand at his side. “That's enough for now,” he said firmly. “The Prophecy can wait, but I cannot. Come, Will.” And before the sorceresses could protest, he marched his apprentice from the room.

Will let himself be led to the visitor’s chamber, a cozy, well furnished room lit warmly by magically glowing torches. Hannibal walked him to the edge of the bed, and bid him to sit. Will complied, though the feather-soft mattress did little to ease his aches. He made a weak noise of complaint when Hannibal left his side, but he returned hastily with a bowl of clear water and rags.

The older man sat beside him on the bed, and cupped his hand on Will’s cheek. The young witcher let his eyes fall closed, and his lips parted with a sigh.

“Will,” Hannibal said, barely a whisper, and the boy looked up with clear eyes at the man at his side. “I grow tired of your mischief,” he said, with a scolding click of his tongue that brought a blush to Will’s face. “Must I literally chain you to keep you?”

“I wish you would,” Will answered, not daring to lower his gaze from the gold fixed to his blue so intently. “Hannibal.”

The man’s head tilted slightly to the side, as it so often did, and Will remembered how Auberon’s had done the same, and how it had brought a queasiness to his stomach. The subtle gesture, the simple tilting of a head, when made by Hannibal, brought a different tug to Will’s stomach now. A burning tug that sparked in his stomach and flowered up, spreading through his chest, up his throat, and out of his mouth in a rush of sighed words. “Hannibal, I thought I had hurt you, and I could not stand it. I called for him and left you. I was so afraid, and it was such a mistake.” He ducked his head to study his torn palms. “I’m sorry.”

Hannibal’s hand reached for his, snared his wrist and pulled it to rest in his lap. He dipped the rag into the bowl of water and let the cool drops drip across Will’s bloodied palm.

“Clearly,” Hannibal began, “you cannot be trusted to be left on your own. Your pattern thus far has proven highly disagreeable. Abysmal,” he said. Will winced as Hannibal brought the rag down to clean his cuts. His motions were gentle, but the water stung his skin. A witcher’s ointment diluted in the water, maybe.

“What’s to be done with me?” Will asked. He kept his head bowed low so his curls fell over his brow, but he dared to flash his eyes upward, to Hannibal, who was looking down, studying the wounds, shallow but numerous, with a dogged concentration.

“What do you think you deserve?” Hannibal asked after a thoughtful hum. Will saw, with his peeking eyes, the twitch that tugged the edges of Hannibal’s lips, and he smiled.

“I am just your apprentice,” Will offered and knew Hannibal could hear the grin in his words. “It is up to my master to dole out punishment.” Hannibal pulled Will’s other hand into his lap, forcing his whole body to inch closer. He dipped the rag, wrung it out, dipped it again, and began tending to the second bleeding palm.

“It is true that I am your master,” Hannibal said as he dabbed with delicacy at the scraped skin. “But you have never been just my apprentice, Will.” He returned the rag to the bowl, set the bowl to the ground, and unfurled a roll of bandages from the bedside. “Never have you just been anything.”

Will did not hide now. His chin was lifted and his eyes were bright on the sharp, flame-lit planes of his favorite face. “Your boon, then.”

Hannibal staid his eyes down at the hands he wrapped so carefully in white cloth. When he was finished, he ripped the excess bandage off between his teeth and tied the wrappings firmly around Will’s tender hands. Only when he was satisfied with his work did he look at Will and speak. “Turn around.”

A moment of confusion as Will processed the command, and then, understanding, he shifted on the bed so his back was to Hannibal. Warm hands brushed at the hair on his neck, and he sighed heavily, exhaustedly. He felt the strands adhered to his skin with blood pried free. “I thought I would never see you again,” Will said, wishing to fill the silence as Hannibal felt along the back of his head, huffing when he fingered the gash in his scalp.

“So you thought to make it a guarantee?” Hannibal asked, his tone a bit harsh, but his hands still gentle. Will felt a cold substance smeared across his scalp. It tingled, then burned, then faded to welcomed numbness. “Did you think I would not find you?”

“I was in another world,” Will said. He felt the movement behind him, felt the heat of the man at his back as Hannibal leaned in, lips by his ear.

“Did you think I would not find you, even there?”

Will swallowed when he felt the kiss, and then the nip on his neck. “I knew I would never see you again.”

“Foolish,” Hannibal growled low, breath warm against his shoulder. Will felt his elven robe slip free, brushed down his arms by large hands.

“Yes,” Will agreed. “You probably would have fared better with those goblets. I fear I’ve not been much of a boon.” Behind him, Hannibal ran his hands down his back. Feeling for more wounds. “I run away. I’m mentally unstable. I’m kidnapped quite often. I can’t keep a set of armor to save my life.” The hands tracing his back wrapped around his waist, fingers fanning wide and firm across Will’s stomach.

Not feeling for wounds.

Hannibal pushed Will back so that he pressed flush against his chest, and with one hand he lifted beneath Will’s chin, turning and tipping his face to kiss. Their lips met, a soft exchange,

and Hannibal pulled away. “Do you wish to no longer be my boon? Shall I release you, Will?”

Will closed his eyes, soaked in the heat surrounding him, and relished the tug in his chest, his too-quick heartbeat. “Please don’t,” he answered, and then he brought a bandaged hand to grasp silver-blonde strands and pulled Hannibal’s lips to his own, kissing him rough, kissing him deep, and only when neither could breathe did he set him free.

No longer snared, Hannibal slunk his body over Will’s, turning the younger man to his back as he moved above him, lowering down to his elbows, and sinking to rest solidly against Will’s naked body. The robe was discarded, forgotten beside the bowl on the floor. Hands wrapped in bandages dragged nails down Hannibal’s back, and Will groaned a complaint at the barrier of leathers.

“I feel like I’m always stripped bare, and you’re always in your armor,” Will fussed, already clamoring to unbuckle every buckle and unclasp every clasp. Hannibal helped him, and in a minute of laughter and frenzy, the witcher’s armor was cast to the floor. His tunic followed in short order. His trousers in no time at all. And then they were skin and lips and whispers.

The hand that smoothed over his backside and lifted his thigh was rough and wonderful, and Will laughed into Hannibal’s neck. The fingers that moved deftly against him were like fire, and when Will gasped, Hannibal slowed and looked. He looked as Will bit his lip and arched his back and moaned with his face half hidden against the sheets.

“Don’t stop,” Will breathed, and their lips slid together, wet and needy, tongues colliding in furious, deep kisses, and then the fingers returned. Hannibal swallowed the boy’s sweet cries and pushed. They were hypnotic, hips rolling together, finding each other, learning each other. When their skin slipped and glistened with sweat, and neither could stand it any longer, Hannibal lined himself up, and with a sucking kiss to Will’s neck, entered him slowly.

They moved together, meant for this, meant for only this, forever. It hurt, and Will could hardly breathe for it, but then the pain fell away, and he sought Hannibal’s lips, and pulled at his waist, and bid him deeper, harder, faster.

Hannibal was dizzy and full to bursting with Will, Will who was beautiful and his and all around him. Careful thrusts became shameless and rough, and they both called out with the urgency of it. After a time, a deliriously stretched time, Will’s vision seared white-hot, and he bit into Hannibal’s shoulder with release. The man above him, in him, followed shortly thereafter, kissing Will’s lips as he spent himself.

They lay that way, sweaty and happy, until the air grew chilly against their damp skin, and Hannibal eased himself away. Will frowned at the emptiness, and when Hannibal returned to wrap a blanket around them both, Will nestled into the crook of Hannibal’s arm. He meant to kiss him, and speak hushed words with him, but soon he found himself fast asleep instead. Hannibal held him fast in his arms, and then he, too, drifted into sweet sleep.

When the hour was late and the witchers rested in their hard-earned embrace, fists pounded the front door of the Lodge. When there was no answer, the fists pounded until wood splintered, and before the sorceresses could spring from their beds in alarm, the guards were stampeding through the halls, heavy boots beating like drums with a menacing echo. Witcher hearing being as it was, Hannibal and Will awoke before they reached their room. They jumped from the bed, undressed and overwhelmed, and had only the time to look at each other with wonder before their chamber door slammed open and a flood of Nilfgaardian soldiers snaked through the entrance.

“Fine work, Hannibal,” a familiar voice rang loudly above the crowd of armored men. “You led us straight to him.”

The older witcher’s head jerked to the owner of the voice who stepped through the parting guards with a dramatic sweep of his velvet gloved hands.

Chilton.

“Hannibal, what’s going on?” Will was asking, and Hannibal stepped in front of him, shielding him from the progressing royal guards.

“Call off your men, Chilton,” Hannibal bellowed at the King, but his only response was a laugh and a smirk. “I will not let you take him.”

“I had a feeling,” Chilton said. “That’s why she’s here.” He stepped aside, and Freddie was standing there, eyes as brilliant as her mane, and Hannibal only had time to turn to Will and kiss him before he felt the spell hit his back.

“Hannibal!” Will cried as the witcher crumpled in his arms and brought them both down to the floor.

Guards swept them up, Will fighting and scraping and wishing for his sword, until he bit the guard clasping his elbow in the cheek and ripped a chunk of flesh away. His mouth streamed with blood and he spit the bit of cheek at Freddie as he was pushed past her. She touched his arm softly, and that was the last thing Will felt before he lost consciousness.

Chapter 7

Will was tired.

He was tired of his vision swimming in blackness and of waking up in unfamiliar places. He was tired of being dragged from one place to the next by each new player that was not Hannibal. He was tired and bitter, and he had been ripped untimely from his lover's bed, and when he looked at Chilton, his hands tied with rope and shoulders gripped by men with spears, he hoped the king could see the hate roiling turbulent beneath his surface. When he spoke, he hoped the king could hear the venom in his words. Would that his speech alone could maim.

"It's not very smart to piss off someone who kills for a living," Will said. He was beyond struggling against the men who held him. His strength could surpass them, but King Chilton had sorceresses at his disposal, as all kings did, and Will preferred his sorry rope bindings to the helplessness of spelled sleep. Better to wait, better to lure with complacency and strike when escape was guaranteed. To his side, slumped in a chair, tied down with more rope, was Hannibal. Will's eyes narrowed at the sight of his companion still trapped in unconsciousness, silver hair a mess. It boiled Will's blood to see Hannibal in such disarray and, with gritted teeth, he sneered at the Nilfgaardian King.

"Oh my," said Chilton as he leaned languidly against his large oak desk. They were in his chambers, grand and opulent, and Chilton was sipping tea and wearing a smug smile. "They said you were feisty. Could it be the elf blood? Or maybe it's the witcher in you." A pause, and then he laughed. "Or maybe it's the witcher NOT in you, at present, which irritates you so."

"That's funny," Will said. "It will be funnier when that witcher wakes up and tears you to shreds."

Chilton flinched, hardly detectable, but Will saw it, and then it was replaced by a loathsome smirk. "You are so brawny, standing there in ropes and not a stitch else. Dear, young thing, don't you know why you're here?"

Will still tasted blood in his mouth, and he ran his tongue over his teeth, wishing it were Chilton's. "You pulled me out of bed, that's why I'm here."

"That's how you're here," Chilton said. "The why is more complicated and far more interesting."

"Pray tell," Will said. "I am agog with anticipation."

Chilton set down his teacup and folded his arms over a chest he most likely thought broader than it was in reality. With a drawn-out sigh, he fixed his beady eyes to Will's daggered blue. "Poor thing. You have no idea." He nodded his head to the witcher tied to the chair. "He is the reason you're here. Your bedfellow, master, sweetheart, whatever you call him, is nothing more than he has ever been."

“And what is that?” Will asked.

“A witcher. A whore for anyone’s bidding with a fat enough purse,” Chilton said. “This time the purse was in exchange for the Child of Prophecy.”

Will scowled, disbelief tainting his voice. “You expect me to believe Hannibal sold me out? For you?”

“For me, you whelp, Hannibal took my crowns and vowed to kill you. Now, I doubted he would do it, so we tracked his movements with help of my vast network of loyalists. Would he have killed you while you lay naked in his arms?” He grinned. “We’ll never know. But he led us to you, and here you are. The Child of Prophecy, ripe and raging in rope.”

The treacherous words washed over him and slipped away like dust in the wind. Chilton wanted Will to believe himself betrayed, wanted him to look at Hannibal and feel pained, but it would not work. He knew Hannibal’s mind. He knew the king’s mind, as well, could feel it twisting up his walls like the slimy, snake vines of the crone cave. His aim was to deceive and defeat, and Will was unconquerable.

“Do you think it is the first time I have been trussed up, Chilton?” Will asked with a raised brow of amusement. “You are hardly the first to hold me captive.” He smiled, a vicious thing. “Don’t you wonder what happened to those who came before you?” He gathered the blood still coating his throat and spat on the ground between Chilton’s fancy boots. “Try and kill me, if that is the conclusion you seek, but do not be surprised when it is your blood I taste next on my tongue.”

Chilton puffed out his chest and took a step back from the pink spit precariously near his velvet boots. “Feisty, indeed,” he said. “I did want you dead; I’ll admit it. When it first became clear to me that the prophecy had been set into motion, my sole conclusion was that you be killed before the end. I am not a cruel man,” Chilton said with his arms extended. “I only sought your end to prevent the end of our world.”

“You speak in the past,” Will said. “Am I to conclude it is no longer your wish to see my end?”

“As I said, I am not cruel. Nor am I a fool.”

Will snorted. “That one’s still on the table, I think.”

Chilton snapped his fingers and the guards jostled Will to silence, and then he continued with deference. “I had the foresight to seek a better deal for all involved. And so you stand before me, unharmed and fit for an exchange.”

Will’s attention was stolen by the wakening groan of the witcher stirring in his chair. With his eyes plastered to Hannibal, he spoke to Chilton. “The only exchange will be of blood when he wakes and we kill you together.” He did not need to look at Chilton to feel his recoil from the threat.

“Not such a romantic end for you, I’m afraid,” Chilton said, his voice drawn tight. “I have made a deal, like I said. Auberon is here, in the palace, waiting to reclaim you. In exchange for your person, he has sworn to never attack our world. You will go back to the Aen Elle, and Temeria will no longer live under the threat of any prophecy.”

“No,” Will said.

“Yes,” responded the king. “If you refuse, you will be dooming this world.”

“Do you think I care a stitch about this world?” Will asked, his mind spinning with panic. Inside, his veins crackled with electric energy.

“I think you care about him,” Chilton said, with a toss of his head toward Hannibal, whose eyes were only now beginning to flutter open. “And if you refuse the exchange, he will die when the rest of us do.”

“Hannibal!” Will yelled at the waking witcher.

Hannibal struggled in sluggish disorientation, arms straining against the ropes that tied him down. “Will,” he mumbled. He looked about the room, confused for a moment, before his eyes fell on the pale body standing beside him, clasped in the hold of the armored men. The sight brought him to full wakefulness, and he snarled, pushing the ropes around him near to snapping.

Chilton startled, clearly unprepared for an escape, and clapped his hands together. “Take the boy to Auberon. Quickly!” The guards pushed Will toward the door, and Hannibal tried to stand in the chair, ropes popping free from around his biceps, but his ankles were still tied, and he tripped to the floor.

“Hannibal!” Will yelled. He strained against his own ropes now, the time for submissiveness buried and dead, and with all his strength he tore loose from the guards and threw himself down beside Hannibal. His fingers tore at the rope wrapped around his ankles and Hannibal, arms free, bludgeoned the men who tried to pull the boy from him. He clasped his arms tight around Will, and when his legs were freed, he cowered over him protectively.

“No one touches him!” Hannibal yelled and the guards could not help but inch back. Their eyes darted nervously to Chilton, who looked ill-amused.

“How surprising. Whatever shall I do with the two of you?”

Will and Hannibal stood together, back to back, growling like wildlings. Will could feel the man's skin against his own, hot and solid. And then it was gone and he whipped around to find out why. The tingling over his flesh told him before he saw it for himself, and with a drop in his stomach he looked at Hannibal, suspended in the air, held aloft and paralyzed by the tall figure beneath him, cloaked and terribly familiar.

“Auberon, release him!” Will begged.

Hannibal was frozen in the air, looking at Will, but unspeaking. He could not speak nor could he move. When his face began to grow red, Will knew he also could not breathe.

His voice nearly stuck in his throat, but he forced out the words, “Auberon! Stop!”

The Aen Elle extended his bone-white hand. “Ensh'eass, come to me or he dies.”

“No!” Will whimpered, frustrated tears filling his eyes. “Please!”

Hannibal rotated in the air, suspended above them. His face grew blue while his golden eyes remained fixed to Will. The young witcher reached desperately for him with his mind, and was stunned by the surge of electricity he found there. Auberon's magic was blocking him from reading Hannibal. So he looked into his eyes and forced with all his heart to express his feeling.

‘I will find you,’ he thought. Hannibal's eyes began to grow dull and Will hollered in a panic at the Alder. “I will go!! Free him!”

The elf lowered his hand and Hannibal crashed to the floor. Will tried to run to him, but Auberon's cold hand fell around his forearm. “Come with me. He will breathe when you are gone from this world.”

“Take us, then!” Will demanded. He cast his eyes down to Hannibal, spasms wracking his body.

Auberon's portal opened and before he could be led, Will jumped through it on his own.

Auberon followed and the portal zipped shut behind them.

Hannibal gasped, inhaling desperately.

Chilton stirred by his desk and, in a flash, the Witcher was upon him with his hands wrapped around the man's neck.

“You imbecile!! What have you done?!” Hannibal yelled, his witcher’s calm demeanor gone with the boy through the portal.

Chilton flapped his hands helplessly at his sides and his eyes grew huge as he was strangled. His guards were afraid and more than a little stunned. Useless, they could only watch their struggling king in the grasp of the beast before them.

Hannibal was merciless. “Do you know what will happen?! You have just guaranteed the prophecy's end, Chilton!” He squeezed tight before he finally released the king, who staggered against his desk, hands flying to his reddened neck.

“I did what needed doing. Auberon will not attack now,” Chilton croaked.

“Auberon needed Will in order to fulfill the prophecy, you fool, and now he has him!”

Chilton swallowed. “He swore to let us be at peace.”

“Yes. The same way I swore to kill my apprentice. Empty words, Chilton. You have doomed us all.”

The king gaped, utterly surprised, stricken by the truth of the witcher’s words.

“Lucky for you, the Child of Prophecy is more important to me than proving the world you are an idiot,” Hannibal said. He shoved a finger to the king’s chest, eyes narrowed and dangerous. “Ready your army, Chilton,” he said. “There is about to be a reckoning.”

Hannibal stormed from Chilton’s chambers, and nearly slammed into the small gathering of women waiting in the hall.

“Hannibal, where’s Will?” Alana asked, eyes watery and wide. Margot, standing beside her, had wide eyes as well, but not out of concern for the boy.

She looked Hannibal up and down. “Where are your clothes?”

He looked down. He was naked. That was fine. “Where’s Freddie?” he hissed.

“Not with us,” Alana said hurriedly. “Hannibal, we didn’t know she would betray you.”

Hannibal moved past her and continued down the hall in his naked strut. The sorceresses followed him, almost running to keep with his pace. “I will kill her if I see her, Alana,” he warned.

“I would not blame you,” she responded instantly. “Or stop you.”

“Hannibal,” said Bedelia, touching a soft hand to Hannibal’s bare shoulder.

He stopped and spun on his heel to face her. “Unless you have a plan, I have no time for your words,” he said.

Bedelia caressed her hand down his arm and cautioned a thin-lipped smile. “I helped Will find you once before,” she said coolly. “Now I will help you find him.”

Will ran when he felt his feet hit the marble floor, but he did not make it far before he felt the tingle in his skin, shocking him and urging his feet to stop. Frozen in his steps, he gasped, doubled over and panting. Behind him, the sound of Auberon’s feet clicked against the floor until Will felt him standing at his back.

“I did not want to use his life as a threat against you, Ensh’eass,” said the Alder. “But you left me no choice.”

Will straightened his back. He was not afraid of Auberon. He thought only of Hannibal. Dimensions would not keep them apart. “Aren’t you worried I will open a portal and return to him?” Will asked as he turned to face the cloaked elf.

“You would not risk his life, Ensh’eass,” said Auberon. “I am sure of that now.”

Will nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “And so you have what you want. Your prince and your Child of Prophecy. So tell me your plan and then let me rest. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

In Temeria, in the Vizima palace, in a quiet room at the end of an empty hall, Bedelia touched Hannibal’s temples with her fingers and whispered a spell into the air. The witcher could not understand the words, only the feeling they cast. His eyes grew tired, his lids fell heavy, and Alana’s hands at his back laid him gently down as he slipped into a deep sleep.

In Tir na Lia, in the prince’s quarters, reclined on a plush settee, Will closed his eyes. He remembered his dreams of the djinn and the ship, remembered how the cloaked figure had found him there and spoken to him. An elven magic, like the opening of portals. If Will could do that, he could walk in dreams. If he was the Child of Prophecy, if he was powerful with electric blood in his veins, he could do as Auberon had done. He could find someone in their dreams, no matter what world they were in.

Hannibal was standing by a bonfire. Around him were dancing troupe members. Beside him was Dimmond, holding up a pint and laughing, though his face was blurred. Hannibal turned about, searching. He was near the flames, but felt no heat. The musicians’ music played loudly, but he felt no vibration beneath his feet as the dancers stomped. He knew where he was, and he knew who he would see when he turned around, because he felt him in every vessel of his being.

“Will,” he said.

The dark haired young man smiled, his angelic beauty illuminated by the light of the fire. “Hannibal. I found you.”

“I think I found you,” Hannibal said and Will shrugged.

“We can argue those details later, I think, when next we see each other in the flesh.”

Hannibal moved closer. “When? Where?”

Will stepped closer, as well. He reached out his hand to touch Hannibal’s chest, but could not feel him. “Auberon plans to move his first army through immediately. Tomorrow.”

“Good,” Hannibal said. “You know the place?”

“I know it, but maybe not as well as you,” he said. “The fortress.”

Hannibal smiled, revealing a devilish row of teeth. “The Wild Hunt’s fortress?”

“The very same,” Will answered. “That is where we will come through. Tomorrow at sunset.” Hannibal nodded. “You will be there?”

“I will be there, Will,” he said. “And we will end this once and for all.”

Will kissed him, though neither could feel it in the strange space of dreams they occupied together.

“Tomorrow,” Will repeated.

“At sunset,” whispered Hannibal.

And then they both vanished from the dream, leaving Dimmond and the dancers alone beside the bonfire.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The witcher stalked the length of the room, which was expansive, and artfully ignored the bustle surrounding him. They frequented the top floor of the fortress, Hannibal, the Lodge of Sorceresses, and Chilton's soldiers, but the silver-maned man held only one thought in his head. An image, perhaps, would be a more accurate description.

The image was of a young man, fair skinned with a flare of flushed skin beneath his shocking blue eyes. Above the eyes, deep and searching, was a brow wrinkled in amusement. Below the eyes rested a nose, which dipped and slanted and came to rest above a perfect mouth, lips red from biting, full and lovely. In Hannibal's mind, the image of the young man smiled, and those lips spread wide to reveal white teeth, charmingly large with the smallest suggestion of an endearing crookedness. His head tilted back with the laugh, and the dark curls of his hair fell away from his face, save a single persistent strand which held fast across his forehead, starkly white. His shoulders shook with the fullness of his laugh, the depth of it.

Hannibal smiled as he continued to stalk back and forth across the room, his mind filled with the image of Will, his boon, his apprentice, his so much more. A tension struck his chest, his heart, and the witcher rolled his head on his shoulders, eeking out the soreness and strain. His eyes darted to the far wall, his vision sharp, his hands fisted at his sides. Right there. That was the spot he would appear.

Maybe it was strange and out of character, when confronted with an army of elves from another dimension, for Hannibal to think solely of a single person. He was a witcher. He should be sharpening his sword. He should be polishing his boots to make clean for the fresh splatters of blood that would soon paint them. But he did not do those things. He paced and he waited, not for the army that would bring the end of the world, but for the boy who travelled with them. Hannibal cared for nothing else.

He wanted Will to step through the portal, so he could grab him and whisk him away from the imminent battle. Outside the fortress, Winston waited for them both. He would throw Will into her saddle and whistle for her to run, and she would gallop across the drawbridge. They would disappear into the depths of the forest, and lose themselves forever from the trappings of their world that had become so tainted with politics and prophecies and other things Hannibal had no patience for. He desired one thing.

Will.

Hannibal looked at the wall, as if by sheer determination alone he could summon the boy to appear.

He glanced out the arrow-slat window. The sun was low in the sky.

Soon.

Will stood behind Auberon on the dais. He was dressed in fine silks, like his father, royal robes fit for the King of the Aen Elle and his son, the prince, the Child of Prophecy. Before them in the great hall was a mass of Alders, all gathered to hear the words before battle and outfitted in sparkling golden armor.

The prince held his head high, the picture of youthful beauty, a twisting flower crown of rose-gold and silver resting atop his head. His dark curls spiraled loosely around a metal-forged leaf. His head tilted slightly, a borrowed gesture that comforted him as he paid false attentiveness to the tall, willowy elf barking orders at his league of soldiers. Inside, he scoffed and fussed and worried. In mere moments, Auberon would tear apart the world with a portal, and through it Will would go, an army in his wake, to rend Temeria asunder.

‘I don’t understand,’ Will had told Auberon the day before, after he had returned with him from the Vizima palace and before he had found Hannibal in the land of their shared dreams. ‘Why do you need me to be there? What purpose does my power yield?’

‘That is not for us to know, Ensh’eass,’ the king had answered solemnly. ‘The power in your blood will bring about the end. Trust in the prophecy to guide you tomorrow, and you will not fail.’

Will had nodded warily.

Trust in the prophecy, he thought wryly as he stood, now, on the dais. He would do no such thing. Will’s trust resided within a single soul. And when Auberon held his hand high above his head, shouting his war cry, Will began to count the seconds until he would see that soul again. The time was moments away. The Aen Elle, a shining wave of hardened gold, repeated the bellows and moved as one unit to face the opposing wall at the end of the hall.

Auberon held out his elbow for Will to hold, and he did, with a steady hand. Together, the king and the prince stepped from the dais, and the crowd parted for them. They walked down the hall, spears clanging against the floor as they passed, and soon they stopped before the wall, and all was silent, save for the hush of Auberon’s melodic voice.

His words were elder speech, and Will did not understand, but he did not need to, because by the end of the feather-light whisper, a blue light burned the atmosphere, and where once there was a wall of stone, a door appeared. Auberon’s hand came to rest on Will's shoulder.

“Trust in the prophecy, Ensh’eass,” he told his son.

Will looked at him, looked into the eyes as blue as his own, and then turned his head back to the portal. Soon, he thought.

And then he stepped through.

His presence sparked a frenzy of movement. Shuffling feet and the echo of spellwork. Hannibal leapt to his side, impossibly fast, and grabbed him by the waist.

“Will,” he murmured in his ear, but Will had no time to respond, because an instant later they found themselves blasted apart from one another. The young witcher watched in horror as Hannibal was thrown across the span of the room. He spun, and the Aen Elle King was behind him, hands lifted in the air. Already the atmosphere around them crackled.

Auberon pulled Will aside and a swarm of the Alder soldiers began to flow from the portal. A hearty yell joined the clanking of moving, armored bodies and Will recognized King Chilton’s charge as the humans met the elves with a violent collision of steel and strength. But Will did not stay his eyes to watch. He twisted around to find the spot where Hannibal had been thrown, but the room was too full, too crowded with frantic fighting, and he could not see him.

“Will!” someone shouted his name, and he turned. It was Alana, and she yelled at him, “Get down!” and he got down, falling into a crouch just in time for her hex to fly across the room and hit a cluster of elves charging forward. The motion yanked Will free from Auberon’s grasp and he took advantage of Alana’s distraction, springing to his feet and running so fast from the portal opening he might have been flying. He passed the front line of Nilfgaardians and shoved by Bedelia as she wove a twinkling spell that sailed through the air with lethal grace. The targeted Aen Elle were set ablaze, and Will could smell burning flesh as they steamed inside their armor.

Screams filled the room as the sorceresses evened the fighting field and more elves fell in ruined piles of smoldering gold. Meanwhile, Will ran, weaving around men and elves alike, ducking swords and spears, eyes wild, searching.

There!

“Hannibal!” Will cried, and the witcher turned, and then they were falling into one another.

The older man took hold of Will’s wrist and filled his palm with a familiar weight. Will looked down and smiled at the dagger, his favorite weapon. He had time to plant a clumsy kiss on the side of Hannibal’s mouth before a body shoved him from behind, and Will spun around to face the Aen Elle. The faceless gold helmet leered at him, and a gauntleted hand reached to grab the prince, his aim to bring him to safety, but Will leaped into the air, above the reaching hand and brought his dagger down in a sweeping arch. The blade plunged into the Alder’s neck through the sliver of space where helmet met shoulder-plates, and a scarlet spray splattered across Will’s face as he drew it back. He had time to look at Hannibal with a blood drenched grin before the pulse took hold of him.

“Will, what’s wrong?!” Hannibal shouted as the boy fell to his knees. “Will!”

He was shaking, the thrum of his heart beat electric shocks through his entire body, and he threw back his head, not in laughter, but in terrible pain, and he released from the depths of his chest a mangled cry. His hands lifted, shaking with every shocking pulse, like blasphemous hearts lived in his palms, and with a tremor that made his vision blur red, streaks of lightning blossomed from Will’s fingertips.

Screams of unbridled terror rattled through the tower and suddenly, Will understood. The power singing through his veins, in his elder blood, it wanted Ensh'eass to spill human blood and bring about their end. He understood the lightning-bright blasts of power burning from his skin were meant to destroy Temeria. Trust in the prophecy. Trust in the Aen Elle. Trust in Auberon. Those were the words floating through his head, slithering through the crevices of his brain.

But Will was used to unwanted thoughts and feelings. He had had a lifetime to practice ignoring them. Through tear-clouded eyes, he looked up at Hannibal, who was crouching beside him, unafraid of the sparks flying from Will's fingers. Will trusted no prophecy. He would not be a Child of Prophecy. He was no one's child. He was Hannibal's boon, and now was the time he would make himself worthy of the only one that mattered.

Will stood on shaky limbs and pointed his hands to the onslaught of Aen Elle still flowing through the portal. The prophecy wanted human blood? He would deliver it the blood of elves.

The streaks of blazing light shot through the air, and Will swept his hands in a wide flourish that leveled an entire line of Alder soldiers. They fell in dozens and Will was crying from the pain coursing through him, but he kept his hands aloft. The Nilfgaardians whooped in triumph as the tide of the fortress battle began to tip in their favour.

Will felt movement beside him, and knew Hannibal remained at his side. He heard his labored breath and the clash of his steel sword as he cut down every elf that tried to reach him.

The Prince of the Aen Elle was changing the tide against his people. The humans were winning.

And then Will felt his skin tingling, and the lightning dwindled to sparks, until his hands held no magic at all. He looked around, looked for Auberon, and spotted him, standing above the fighting on the spiral steps that led to the tower battlements. His hands were lifted and his blue eyes stared straight at Will. Suddenly, Will screamed and his legs betrayed him, and he crashed to the floor, crushed beneath the Aen Elle King's battering magic that was draining him, draining him of everything in his veins that sparked electric.

"No," Will moaned, and Hannibal sliced through the abdomen of an approaching Alder before rushing to his side.

"Will?" he asked, worriedly, his bloody hands coming to rest on his apprentice's tear stained cheek.

Beneath his touch, Will shook. "He's taking it," Will whispered. "I can feel it leaving me."

His elven blood, his magic, it was being sucked from him, and Will felt the loss like a limb cut free of his body. Hannibal followed Will's gaze to Auberon on the staircase, and wanted to move for him, but dared not leave Will's side.

“Go!” Will yelled with a final surge of strength. “Try, Hannibal. This is what he wanted, to take my power for himself. Stop him. Try.” Will whispered, and then he fell flat to the floor, eyes closed and twitching.

Hannibal scooped him up, threw him over his shoulder, and charged through the room. The Aen Elle were less now, but those that remained standing fought the Nilfgaardians tirelessly. Hannibal tore through them all with brute strength. But Auberon had seen him coming, and he had vanished to the battlements above.

The witcher pursued him. He took to the stairs, his boy held firmly against his shoulder, and was on the tower top moments later. At the edge of the battlements, Auberon stood, glowing with power. Smiling. Head tilting, curious.

Hannibal set Will down gently. And then he approached the Aen Elle King.

“What have you done to him?” Hannibal snarled. His steps brought him quickly to Auberon, and they faced one another with shared wickedness.

“He did it to himself when he chose to use his power against his own people,” Auberon answered. “I took his power. He is now no more Aen Elle than you, witcher. And no more capable of stopping me.”

Hannibal rushed him, sword lifted above his head. Auberon lifted his hand, and Hannibal rolled out of the blast of magic, and it swept harmlessly over his head. His blade swung at the Alder’s neck, but the next bolt of magic connected, and Hannibal was thrown to his back. Auberon stood over the fallen witcher, then bent low to clutch him by the neck. With ethereal strength, he lifted Hannibal.

“I will kill you now,” Auberon said.

And then the elf’s eyes flashed wide with shock, and he dropped the witcher in front of him.

Because the witcher behind him had his dagger buried deep in Auberon’s spine.

“I will kill you now, I think,” Will hissed in his father’s ear. “And I will do it without the aid of magic.” He twisted the blade. Over Auberon’s shuddering shoulders, Will looked at Hannibal.

By the top of the stairs, Alana and Margot appeared. They called out for the witchers. Hannibal’s eyes never left Will’s. They did not need to speak. Will pulled his dagger from Auberon’s back and let him topple, lifeless, from the edge of the tower. His body made a joyful splash in the moat below. And then, as the sorceresses began to run toward them, Will pulled Hannibal into his arms and they fell from the battlements, their bodies intertwined and spiraling through the air into blissful silence.

It would be told, in the legends spun, that they sacrificed themselves to save the world. With their king defeated, the Aen Elle retreated back through the portal to rally.

But they never returned. What would be the use? Their Child of Prophecy was dead. The king and the prince were lost to them, and all they could do was pick up the shattered fragments of their people. The Aen Elle no longer bothered Temeria.

It was a shame, King Chilton said, that Hannibal and his apprentice had died for the cause, but their memory would not be forgotten. A monument was built in their honor. They would go down in history as saviors.

Alana had wept. There could be no funeral. Their bodies were never found.

Deep in a forest, when all was quiet and still, a pale blue light cut through the air, and two bodies tumbled through it.

They landed with a thud.

A curly head groaned. A silver head grunted his displeasure.

“That was the last of my magic, I think,” said one witcher to the other. “I can’t feel it anymore.”

Hannibal sighed and rolled off of Will. They lay side by side in the soft, sweet smelling grass. “A fine way to spend it,” he said. His hand found Will’s.

“I’m just a witcher now,” the younger man said, and when Hannibal rolled to his side to face him, he grinned.

“You’re never just anything,” Hannibal told him, and then he leaned in to kiss his forehead.

Will grabbed a fistful of silver-blond hair and kissed Hannibal firmly on the mouth. “They’ll think we’re dead,” he whispered when they broke apart for air.

“Good,” Hannibal said. “May they never bother us again.”

The witchers kissed each other on the forest floor.

After a time, when the air had grown chilly and the sun had set and the sky turned a velvety black, Hannibal whistled. Through the trees, a mare appeared with a snort of greeting. Hannibal took Will by the waist and threw him into the saddle. Then he mounted the horse behind him, arms wrapping firmly around his boy’s waist to take up Winston’s reins.

And the witchers disappeared into the night.

Chapter End Notes

And then they lived happily ever after, until the end of their days.

That's the end of their journey for now, you guys. Thank you soooo much for all the support on my little fanfiction adventure. <3 Lots of love!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!